The émigré historian: a scholarly persona?

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CHAPTER 2

The Émigré Historian

A Scholarly Persona?

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Introduction

To what extent can the émigré historian be considered a scholarly persona? That is to say, to what degree can the émigré historian, living and working in hybrid spaces between cultures, be regarded as a specimen of a distinct type of historian, different from others, characterised by habits or working manners of which we can say: these are typical of émigré historians? Although the question has seldom been raised in this particular form, the sheer amount of studies devoted to, for instance, German émigré historians in the United States suggests that there is something special about émigrés that makes them more interesting objects of study than, say, historians who spent their entire careers in stable cultural contexts. Already in the 1920s, the American sociologist Robert E. Park commented on this special aura of the émigré, whom he described as 'a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples', 'a man on the margins of two cultures and two societies', navigating between the not always reconcilable demands of his 'old self and the new'.[1] Even if Park's gendered language bears the marks of its time, his fascination with cultural hybridity has clearly endured, also among historians of historiography. Yet few of them have straightforwardly raised the question with which I started: To what extent can the émigré historian be considered a scholarly persona?

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The short version of the answer I am going to develop in this chapter takes the form of a 'no, but'. There are few meaningful senses in which we can speak about 'the' émigré historian, in the singular, as representing a distinct scholarly persona, mainly because émigrés' experiences in different times and places were too diverse to allow for gross generalisation. Even if we zoom in on the first generation of German émigré historians in the United States, as I will do in this chapter, the ways in which these historians dealt with their cultural in-betweenness were too diverse to fit the mould of a single scholarly persona. If at all they represented a distinct type of historian, it was merely because of their *bildungsbürgerliche* background, visible in foreign language proficiency, knowledge of Beethoven and Wagner, and ability to quote Goethe or Schiller from memory – a cultural capital that struck some of their American colleagues and students as distinctively European.[2]

However, at the same time, if this postwar generation of German-American historians illustrates anything, it is that issues of professional identity were never far away. Even if these German-American émigré historians did not constitute a persona themselves, their ongoing negotiations with historiographical traditions on both sides of the Atlantic offer an interesting glimpse on how historians tried to mediate between different personae – by contrasting them, by combining them, or by trying to steer a middle course between them. More importantly, from their positions overseas, émigré historians like Hajo Holborn, Hans Rothfels, Hans Rosenberg and Felix Gilbert – all former students of Friedrich Meinecke in Berlin – developed a keen eye for what was distinctive about German historical studies. Interestingly, this did not merely turn them into observers of German scholarly personae; some of them also began to analyse these models through other, social and institutional lenses than had been customary in their home country before the war.

Existing Scholarship

Given current interest in hybridity and in-betweenness, not only among cultural theorists but also among historians of migration, one might expect that scholarship on forced migration of German historians into the English-speaking world would display a lively interest in how Hajo Holborn, Felix Gilbert and their contemporaries manoeuvred between the old world of German historical scholarship and the new world of American higher education. One might expect that social and scholarly exchanges would be treated not as one-way traffic or as a transfer from one country to another, but, as Mitchell G. Ash and Alfons Söllner put it, 'as interactive processes embedded in cultural settings that are themselves fluid enough to change'.[3]

Although this is exactly what some newer studies on second-generation émigrés try to do – Andreas Daum's work comes to mind[4] – most existing scholarship on first-generation German émigré historians in the United States has been written from a decidedly German perspective. The question that has dominated the existing literature, even if written in English, is how émigré historians related to, continued to draw on, or contributed to changes in German historiographical traditions. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, to mention only one example, consistently raises the question of the extent to which German émigrés 'remained within the Rankean paradigm'. With a similar focus, Michael H. Kater depicts Hans Rosenberg as 'the father of modern German social history' and thereby as a healthy corrective to the 'tight network of nationalist historians' that had dominated pre-war German historical studies.[5] In associating individuals with historiographical paradigms or schools, these research foci are indebted to a long tradition of thinking about historiography primarily in terms of 'approaches'. Like many other studies on European or American historiography, existing literature on German-American émigré historians shows an overwhelming interest in how 'approaches', characterised by distinct topics and/or methodologies, developed over time.

Although there is nothing wrong with this type of historiographical research, there are, generally speaking, two good reasons for supplementing this perspective with one that revolves around issues of professional identity. What does it mean to be a historian, at a given time and place? What demands does historical teaching or research make on the self (intellectually, emotionally, physically)? And how does this translate into activities that fill historians' calendars? One reason for raising these questions is that they bring into view not only historians' work – their published output – but also their day-to-day activities, their working habits, their teaching styles, their public service and outreach; in short, historians' professional identities as shaped on a daily basis in classrooms, libraries, faculty clubs and conference rooms. Another reason for focusing on such professional identities is that these may prove to be a missing link between existing scholarship on historical methods, institutions, biographies and the political subtexts of historical studies. Although I cannot substantiate this second claim here – I have done that elsewhere[6] – the first point seems highly pertinent to the study of émigré historians. If these émigrés were intermediaries between academic cultures, then what did this in-betweenness do with their professional identities?

Scholarly Personae

If I approach these questions through the prism of scholarly personae, I single out one element of a cluster of overlapping things: professional self-images,

formative practices, daily routines, embodied working practices and exemplary figures. Scholarly personae is a technical term for models of how to be a historian. Often, though not always, these models are ideal-typical ones, sharply defined in contrast to each other, not because actual differences between historians are as large as these schematic distinctions suggest, but for heuristic reasons, to bring out as clearly as possible the differences between available modes of being a historian.[7]

Let me give some examples from nineteenth-century German historical studies – a world that cast a long shadow over the discipline in which the émigré historians to whom I will turn in a moment had been socialised in the 1920s and 1930s. German historians in the 1890s had quarrelled intensely over 'old' and 'new' ways of doing history, epitomised, they claimed, by Leopold von Ranke and Karl Lamprecht, respectively. The qualifier 'they claimed' is important: the Ranke attacked by Lamprecht and vigorously defended by Georg von Below and others did not exactly fit the historical Ranke. It was an image, created for polemical reasons, that highlighted some of Ranke's alleged habits and virtues – his thoroughness and commitment to political history writing in particular – at the cost of others.[8] This was hardly new. Since at least the 1840s, Ranke's name had served as a symbolic representation of aesthetic 'pleasure in history' (an aestheticism that distinguished itself from 'moralism' as embodied by Friedrich Christoph Schlosser) and as an epitome of Protestant impartiality (over against the Catholic dogmatism attributed to Johannes Janssen). Likewise, in the 1860s and 1870s, Georg Waitz and Heinrich von Sybel had frequently been played off against each other, as models of philological '*Wissenschaftlichkeit*' and patriotically-inspired history teaching, respectively. In all these cases, the names of Ranke, Schlosser, Janssen, Waitz and Sybel had not primarily served as proper names, referring to concrete individuals, but generic names, denoting types of historians – as Carl von Noorden noted when he observed as early as 1862, right after Schlosser's death, that the name of the deceased had acquired symbolic meanings that no longer did justice to the historical Schlosser.[9]

Whether or not scholarly personae were named after high-profile members of the profession, it is important to underline that precisely as ideal-typical models, personae were hardly ever fully embodied by individual historians. Personae rather served as coordinates on imaginary maps of the discipline, allowing historians to position themselves or their colleagues in the field under reference to familiar points of orientation. Although some managed to identify with a single persona, most historians preferred to steer a course between several personae – between Ranke and Janssen, for instance, as was the case for many Catholic historians around 1900, or between Ranke and Treitschke, as Dietrich Schäfer and other early twentieth-century

political historians tried to do. Scholarly personae, in short, were not necessarily models for imitation. In most cases, they served as ideal-typical models in relation to which historians could position themselves – by dissociating themselves from some models, by combining several of them, or even by introducing new ones, from other countries or neighbouring fields.[10]

The *Émigré* Historian

This brings us to German-American émigré historians, whose replacement in a world different from pre-war German historical studies made them encounter personae unlike the Rankes, Treitschkes and Lamprechts from their youth. What struck them in the new world, judging by their letters and later autobiographical accounts, was the near omnipresent model of the historian as an undergraduate teacher, especially at colleges without much of a research culture. Teaching fifteen hours a week to a student population largely consisting of poor Jewish, Irish and Italian emigrants, as in Rosenberg's case, required a different type of academic than that bred by German universities before the war.[11] Also, in more research-friendly environments, émigrés encountered the historian as a 'grant hunter' – a term that Gerhard Masur's German-language memoirs kept in English so as to bring out the distinctively American features of a scholar always in search of new research money.[12] In the Second World War, moreover, German émigré historians became acquainted with yet another type of academic: the scholar in civil or military service; for instance, at the Office of Strategic Services, where both Gilbert and Holborn were employed for a number of years.[13] None of these professional identities had a clear equivalent in pre-war Germany.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, German émigrés responded quite differently to these new models of professional identity. Some adapted relatively well, as did Gilbert, who loved his undergraduate teaching job at Bryn Mawr College. In Holborn's case, adaptation was even so successful that he became the first non-American-born president of the American Historical Association. Others responded more ambiguously, describing themselves, as Dietrich Gerhard did in a letter to Meinecke's widow, as 'a kind of scholarly hawker, carrying his bundle from continent to continent – an image that your husband, for all his tolerance, would surely have shaken his head at'.[14] Rosenberg, too, saw himself as moving back and forth between two worlds, depicting himself as 'a mediator and interpreter of the conflicting valuations, real and fancied, of different national cultures'.[15] In the realm of academic duty, this meant that Rosenberg devoted himself fully to educating young Americans at Brooklyn College but remained a little too German (as he put it) to give up on serious historical research:

> My outlook is no longer that of an emigrant. By degrees I have acquired the mentality of an immigrant who has taken roots in the land of his adoption. . . . At the same time, however, I do not consider it a disloyal attitude if I endeavour in a humble and restrained way, to remain faithful to what I value as the fruitful kernel of the German university tradition which, however gleamed or perverted in recent years, has made no trifling contribution to the common treasures of western civilization.[16]

Of course, there were also scholars whose hearts had remained in the '*Heimat*'. In their letters, they complained about 'intellectual isolation' ('*wissenschaftliche Einsamkeit*') or gave expression to a 'longing for Germany' ('*Sehnsucht nach Deutschland*') that made them eager to return – as Hans Rothfels managed to do by accepting a call from the University of Tübingen in 1951.[17] Add to this that the first-generation émigrés developed very different scholarly profiles – with Gilbert, for instance, displaying little interest in politics but Rothfels and especially Holborn breathing new life into the nineteenth-century model of the historian as 'political educator of his people' – and it should be clear that they were a 'very heterogeneous crowd' indeed.[18]

In order to understand these differences, we have to take into account at least three variables. One is the émigrés' personal and professional backgrounds, which had been different enough to make them occupy a wide range of positions in pre-war German historical studies. As Mommsen puts it: 'They all came from the German '*Bildungsbürgertum*'. Otherwise, they were of different intellectual, philosophical and political persuasions.'[19] Secondly, in their adopted land, the émigrés encountered American historical studies in a variety of incarnations. As a research fellow at Chicago's Newberry Library, Hans Baron met other colleagues and engaged in different practices than Holborn at Yale or Gilbert at Bryn Mawr. Last but not least, not all émigrés were as eager or able to integrate in American academia as Holborn was. Gustav Mayer hardly spoke English, whereas Rothfels' biographer, Jan Eckel, relates that he has searched in vain for correspondence or other evidence of Rothfels maintaining more than superfluous contacts with American colleagues.[20]

What does this tell us about the émigré historian as a scholarly persona? As long as we take a scholarly persona to be a recognisable model of how to be a scholar, characterised by distinctive virtues, skills, habits or other dispositions, it should be clear that German émigré historians were too diverse to conform to a single persona. Although Robert Park, the Chicago sociologist, tried to transform the émigré into a persona – a 'new type of personality' that he called the 'marginal man' – this generalisation does not hold against empirical evidence.[21] Instead of clinging to a single persona, émigré historians navigated the conflicting demands of multiple personae – just as quite a few struggled, more generally, with social roles and expectations that were different than they were used to. (Gerhard Masur, to mention only one

example, was quite astonished at the answer he received to his inquiry as to who would polish his shoes and take his clothes to the launderette: 'You do that yourself'.[22])

Perhaps the only sense in which German historians did represent a single type of scholar was that they were all '*Bildungsbürger*', with language skills, a cosmopolitan outlook and a cultural education that made them appear in American eyes as distinctively European. As Carl E. Schorske remembered:

> My own experience leads me to think that the émigrés . . . contributed less to the development of us natives as scholarly professionals than is usually assumed and much more to our cultural formation. They contributed to making intellectuals out of us young academics by broadening our horizons and multiplying our awareness of the existential implications of ideas – philosophical and literary, as well as social and political.[23]

However, the scholar as a culturally educated citizen hardly qualifies as a scholarly persona: cultural capital is compatible with a range of virtues, skills and working habits.

Perceptive Observers

Still, even if émigré historians did not represent a single persona, their transatlantic experiences certainly increased their *fascination* for historians' professional identities. This is the second, more positive argument I would like to make. On average, émigré historians were perceptive observers of scholarly habits and practices. In their letters, we find them commenting on 'the ins and outs of American college "business" [*Betrieb*]', with its heavy teaching loads and broad survey courses, which made considerable demands on historians used to more specialist teaching.[24] Others observed the lack of foreign language proficiency among American students or found themselves surprised by the 'grantsmanship' of scholars keen on acquiring research money.[25]

If these are observations on American academic life, often more elaborate were the reflections that émigré historians offered on German historical studies. Although their interest in German historiography often dated back to their years of study with Meinecke, war and forced migration fuelled this interest by lending urgency to critical reflection on the state of German historiography. To some extent, historiography courses offered a means for such reflection, also because American students, trying to make sense of a continent ravaged by war, were increasingly interested in studying the intellectual world of the Weimar Republic.[26] Rothfels taught such a historiography course in Chicago, with classes on Ranke and Meinecke, whereas Helene Wieruszoswki (another student of Meinecke) joined Friedrich Engel-Jánosi's historiography course at Johns Hopkins University.[27]

More important, however, was that Gilbert and others critically assessed the strengths and weaknesses of German historiography in journals like *The American Historical Review*. One belief that gained ground, even among Meinecke's students, was that '*Ideengeschichte*' or history of ideas as practised by their former teacher – 'an elitist-esoteric history of political ideas and doctrines that in many respects disguised the reality of historical life', as one émigré would put it – no longer sufficed.[28] Writing in 1947, Gilbert diagnosed that 'even before the Nazi period German historiography had become slightly obsolete in its exclusive concentration on political and intellectual history with its attendant neglect of problems arising out of a study of social and economic developments'.[29] Consistent with this criticism, Gilbert tried to do justice to economic factors in understanding intellectual life in postwar Germany. Advocating democracy 'at a time of economic misery and governmental weakness', he warned, may well have detrimental effects. Likewise, Gilbert believed that a resurgence of nationalist sentiments was primarily due to 'a widening of the gap' between Germany's Eastern and Western zones.[30]

Interestingly, this rediscovery of social and economic realities in which the life of the mind was embedded had implications for how émigré historians positioned themselves vis-à-vis existing scholarly personae. Continuing a tradition of mapping historical studies by drawing schematic contrasts between embodied models of historical scholarship, some émigrés followed Meinecke in contrasting Ranke (understood as an epitome of traditional political and intellectual history) with Jacob Burckhardt, of whom Gilbert declared in 1947: 'Burckhardt is increasingly emerging as a quite unique and powerful figure.'[31] As a later commentator would note, Burckhardt was an attractive alternative to Ranke because he allowed historians 'to encompass revolutionary discontinuity within their historicist premises. He never succumbed to the implicit glorification of national power politics. His dark tonalities provided the appropriate mood music for the project of German repentance . . . .'[32] Others, more radical in their reorientation, placed their hopes in the social sciences instead and contrasted their ideal of the historian as a democratically committed social scientist (embodied by Karl Dietrich Bracher, among others) with what Rosenberg disapprovingly called 'Ranke and the historical establishment'.[33]

Rosenberg himself, however, went even further. Writing to the American Department of State, after a few weeks of guest lecturing in Berlin in 1950, he eloquently lamented the 'mental isolation' of German historians, or what he called in more elaborated form their

> widespread narrowness of outlook, the prevalence of immaturity of political judgement and of a harmful spirit of political parochialism, the lack of insight into the complexities of social processes, the often amazing ignorance and

> naiveté with reference to matters economic and technological, the staleness and inflexible conventionalism in the choice of research topics, the clinging to the 'old stuff' in teaching.[34]

Rosenberg was enough of a social and economic historian to realise that such deficiencies were not primarily caused by professors socialising their students into old-fashioned modes of thought but by social and institutional factors. According to Rosenberg, the administrative structure of German academia had been a key factor in keeping non-conformist tendencies at bay: 'Since these gentlemen [i.e. German professors] are used to replenish their ranks by cooptation down to the point of designating, not infrequently, their own successors their grip will not easily be broken.'[35] In the same 1950 letter to the American Department of State, Rosenberg argued that 'the attenuation of external pressures and material difficulties' in postwar Berlin made reorientation on social science models quite unlikely: people without income or proper housing have other things to do than reconsider their intellectual habits. This meant that, for Rosenberg, historians' working manners were not a product of intellectual choices: he saw them as developing under the 'force of circumstances' at least as much as through 'personal inclination'.[36]

This added an interesting twist to how German historians used to speak about scholarly personae. In the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods, personae had conventionally been defined in terms of virtues and vices. Although the 1920s had witnessed some attempts at redescribing these categories of virtue and vice in psychological language,[37] a focus on individual character traits, partly determined by personal inclination, partly shaped by examples one chose to follow, had continued to dominate historians' discourse. Rosenberg, by contrast, understood personae not as models with which one could choose to align but as embodiments of historiographical habits that had been decisively shaped by social and institutional factors. This anticipated a line of thinking, developed more fully in the second half of the century, that depicted nineteenth-century historiography not as a world populated by virtuous individuals but as a social reality determined by bourgeois conventions, middle class interests and powerful state protection.[38]

Conclusion

So, to what extent did German émigré historians in the United States constitute a scholarly persona? This chapter has argued that the first generation of German émigrés was too diverse, in terms of the kind of historian they wanted to be, to be reducible to a single persona. A historiographical equivalent to Park's 'marginal man' did not exist. At the same time, émi-

gré historians turned out to be dedicated observers of scholarly personae, especially in Germany. While continuing the established habit of schematically juxtaposing historiographical models, historians like Rosenberg added a new dimension to the existing discourse by emphasising the social and institutional embeddedness of scholarly personae. The case examined in this chapter therefore suggests that it is more fruitful to study how émigré historians positioned themselves vis-à-vis competing personae in their field, and through what prisms they interpreted such personae, than to force these émigré historians themselves into the mould of a single persona.

On a larger canvas, this implies that hybridity and cultural in-betweenness should not be reified into distinct identities. As illustrated by the émigrés discussed in this chapter, there are many different ways in which scholars can live and work between cultures. Depending on cultural background, host environment and personal capacity for adaptation, among other factors, in-betweenness can take on a host of different forms. It therefore makes sense to regard cultural hybridity not as constitutive of a distinct 'émigré identity' but as a starting point for investigations into identities that are made, lost, challenged and/or transformed under influence of mobility or forced migration.[39]

Notes

1. Park, 'Human Migration and the Marginal Man', 892.
2. Barkin, 'German Émigré Historians in America', 155.
3. Ash and Söllner, 'Introduction', 12.
4. Daum, 'Refugees from Nazi Germany as Historians', 1–52, esp. 29–31.
5. Mommsen, 'German Historiography', 32–66, at 56 (see 57, 59, 60); Kater, 'Refugee Historians in America', 80, 92.
6. Paul, 'A Missing Link in the History of Historiography', 1011–28.
7. Paul, 'Scholarly Personae', 1–14.
8. Henz, *Leopold von Ranke*, 385–462.
9. Paul, 'The Virtues of a Good Historian', 681–709.
10. Paul, 'The Virtues and Vices of Albert Naudé', 327–38.
11. Rosenberg, 'Rückblick auf ein Historikerleben', 17.
12. Masur, *Das ungewisse Herz*, 267.
13. Katz, 'German Historians in the Office of Strategic Services', 137–38.
14. Dietrich Gerhard to Antonie Meinecke, 18 September 1954, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 205.
15. Rosenberg to Harry D. Gideonse, 31 January 1947, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 386.
16. Rosenberg to Harry D. Gideonse, 31 January 1947, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 386.
17. Hans Baron to Walter Goetz, 15 October 1954, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 316; Helene Wieruszowski to Friedrich Meinecke, 16 February 1947, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 328.

18. As Gay put it in a slightly different context in his 'Reflections on Hitler's Refugees', 117. The phrase 'political educator of his people' was used by Schnabel, among others: Berger, *The Search for Normality*, 57.

19. Mommsen, 'German Historiography', 41.

20. Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 105; Eckel, *Hans Rothfels*, 219–20.

21. Park, 'Human Migration', 892.

22. Masur, *Ungewisse Herz*, 263.

23. Schorske, 'The Refugee Scholar', 144.

24. Hans Rosenberg to Friedrich Meinecke, 4 December 1947, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 395.

25. Hans Baron to Walter Goetz, 15 October 1954, Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 313; Masur, *Ungewisse Herz*, 267.

26. Spitzel, *History After Hitler*, 49–81.

27. Hans Rothfels to Friedrich Meinecke, 12 October 1946, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 159–60; Helene Wieruszoswki to Friedrich Meinecke, 11 August 1946, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 325–26.

28. Rosenberg, 'Rückblick auf ein Historikerleben', 13.

29. Gilbert, 'German Historiography', 57.

30. Gilbert, 'Germany Revisited', 429, 431.

31. Felix Gilbert to Friedrich Meinecke, 14 June 1947, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 277.

32. Maier, 'Comment: Theodor Schieder', 393. For the roles played by German émigré historians in translating and reviewing Burckhardt's work, see Lionel Gossman, 'Jacob Burckhardt', 539–42.

33. A phrase that Rosenberg used as early as 13 February 1929 in a letter to his mother and siblings, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 340.

34. Hans Rosenberg to the Department of State, Division of Exchange of Persons, 11 November 1950, in Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 411.

35. Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 412.

36. Ritter, *German Refugee Historians*, 414, 409.

37. Schmeidler, 'Zur Psychologie des Historikers', 219–39, 304–27.

38. See, e.g., Weber, *Priester der Klio*.

39. Funding was generously provided by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

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