

Karl Stern

THE PILLAR
OF FIRE

With an Introduction by Stanley L. Jaki

Urbi et Orbi/Remnant of Israel

12. *Home*

Most people think that the anti-semitism which we encountered under Hitler, is the same anti-semitism as one encounters anywhere else—in drawing-room conversations, in universities, in clubs, in railway compartments and in church groups, in the unwritten laws pertaining to the allotment and hierarchy of jobs—only exaggerated to an utmost degree of injustice and cruelty. This is a serious error. Quantum physics teaches us that energy, in its transformations, does not increase in a continuum but by “jumps.” There is something similar about Evil.

In Bavaria, during the Wittelsbach monarchy, there had been

a little of what we later called the "good old pre-war anti-semitism." Jews labored under handicaps similar to those under which numerous racial and religious minorities labor in other parts of the world. They were barred from certain public offices, if not constitutionally, at least by an unwritten law. There was the element of the "Christ-killer" and all that in some of the children. But as a whole most of the Catholic people (and they constituted the majority) shared the views of Herr Josef Filser quoted in the first chapter. The old king liked the venerable chief Rabbi of Munich, Doctor Werner, who was not infrequently seen at court. Herr Fränkel, an extremely Orthodox Jew from one of the oldest Munich families, was made Royal Councillor for Transport and Trade. Catholic children earned a little pocket money by switching the electric light on and off on Friday nights in the households of Orthodox Jews. The Regensburg cookbook in which pious Frau Maria Schandry included numerous recipes for Lent and Christmas, also gave with complete impartiality, and not without fondness, the recipes for certain bakeries and dishes which the "Israelites" consume on Friday night and on Passover.

All this had changed after the First World War. With a wave of chauvinism a new brand of anti-semitism appeared which I mentioned in connection with my school days. The Jewish Youth Movements and the Zionism of the young people were a reaction to this. During this time my parents received a large amount of literature, mainly periodicals, which seemed to emphasize that German Jews were Germans. The Jewish Community in our town resolved to build a synagogue, a real building, something like a Protestant church, which was to replace the old embarrassing prayer-hall inside the brewery. There was at least one community meeting every year concerned with the plan of that synagogue. It struck me that those who were interested in the building, including Grandfather, did not seem to care for it so much from a religious point of view (one could serve God

equally well in the old prayer-hall) as from a desire for something like collective prestige. There would be a solemn opening, the mayor of the town, the official representatives of other religious congregations and the representatives of various *vereine* would appear; there would be a brass band; there would be speeches; and there would be, last but not least, a detachment of Jewish war veterans. (This last point seemed to have an importance which was quite disproportionate. The question of how many people have fought in a war, and how many have been killed, seems to be one of the most important in the social struggle of minorities. When, before the Second World War, a British submarine remained submerged and its entire crew was lost, I read in one of the Catholic London papers a statement as to how many of the sailors on board were Catholics. This may have arisen out of the same sentiment; at any rate I do not understand why anyone would care for such statistics.)

The building of that synagogue never came about. But at those community meetings Grandfather and Herr Kommerzienrat Gross used to speak of the plans of the new synagogue with eagerness which had nothing to do with the Zeal of Thy House. It rather implied that it was about time to display something; what exactly, nobody knew. This was precisely what we in the youth movement meant when we spoke of "spineless, undignified, cringing assimilation." In the face of increasing anti-semitism the older generation seemed to repeat anxiously and with increased frequency: "But look, we are exactly like you," while we said: "Yes, we are different from you, we are Jews, and if you want to know, we are proud of it!"

Now things in our little town were different. When I left Munich and the Institute to visit my home-town for the first time, during the Nazi era, Father received me at the railway station. It was evening. The station platform was dimly lit. There was the usual cluster of people behind the ticket barrier, and looking from the car window, I spotted Father among them. He was

slightly stooped, his hands in his greatcoat pockets, and he peered searchingly towards the train. I had seen him like this hundreds of times before. Yet, without any physical detachment, he was detached from the crowd. Or did I perceive something which was not there? There was his sudden smile of recognition. After I had passed the barrier and he embraced me we seemed to be, by this simple gesture, more isolated from the people around us.

Herr Weigl, the bicycle dealer, said: "Guten Abend, Herr Stern," perhaps louder and more forcefully than had been the custom. Presently I smelled again the old familiar smell of the railway station, a stale smell of soot, human beings, sandwich parcels, glue, paper and apples. Father said: "Nun, wie geht's? Tell me something!" There had been times, in my teens, when I might perhaps have said to myself: "Why does he not, once in a while, use a new phrase, just one new one?" This time I felt like moving up more closely to him while we crossed the hall and walked towards the town. The people around us, Herr Weigl's loud greeting, and the smell of the station conveyed a new strangeness. Father said: "He is decent," referring to Herr Weigl, and I felt incredibly embarrassed.

On the Bahnhofspatz was an enormous sign in enamel: "In this town Jews are undesired." I had known of the existence of these signs in all German towns, on all places in front of railway stations; but the moment I saw it I realized that, somewhere deep down, I had entertained a dim, ill-defined belief, bizarre and illogical, that our town might be an exception. We passed the lumber yards which adjoined the Station Avenue. In the shadow, just outside the pale of the big arc lamps, one could see the quadrangular piles of wood. Their silhouettes looked like rows of fortresses. This is what they had been to us when we were children, little forts in which we hid for hours, waiting for the enemy gang which was camped in other lumber fortresses up on the height of the Taubenberg. We went along the main street, the Ludwigstrasse, past the huge elaborate monastery of

the Redemptorist Fathers. (When I was small Mother used to tell me that it had cost a million marks to build it.)

In the light of a street lamp, Judge Deigendesch passed us and took his hat off. Father took his hat off, perhaps a trifle more eagerly than usual, and bowed, perhaps just a little more deeply than usual, or did it only appear to me like this? "He is also decent—one of the decent ones," Father remarked, and I felt again the same embarrassment. As we neared the railway bridge there was a streamer across the street: "The Jews are our misfortune." I tapped the wide stone railing over which I used to run barefoot as a boy, the glistening steel lines deep below. One had to do this with one's eyes fixed on the sidewalk of the bridge, and the purpose had invariably been to achieve a mild and agreeable throbbing of fear. This evening it was too dark for the rails down below to be seen but I looked at the signal lamps getting lost in the distance, and they seemed to be at one with some world through which Father and I had never walked before.

We passed a few more people, some of whom said, "Guten Abend, Herr Stern," and the ceremonial repeated itself. We passed all the familiar places. There was a bierkeller with a bowling alley. There we used to sit on summer evenings at tables with our sandwiches, drinking beer and eating big white radishes. On a square not far from it was a big showcase, brightly lit, and above it a sign: "The Jews are our misfortune." I knew those showcases. They displayed a weekly paper which was entirely devoted to enlightening the population on the Jewish question. There were detailed stories of, let us say, a Jewish lawyer of Magdeburg who assaulted his non-Jewish secretary; or an Orthodox congregation who kept German girls in the cellar of their synagogue for the purpose of commercial prostitution; statistics of the part played by the Jews in the Russian revolution and in the organization of "Wall Street." Of course, Father and I did not stop to read it. Perhaps in passing it we walked just a little more quickly. We knew the kind of informa-

tion which was displayed. We glanced furtively out of the corner of our eyes and remarked simultaneously that nobody was standing there reading it at the moment. "I never see anyone stopping there," Father said.

We passed another square, in the middle of which was a fountain with a bronze gilded Saint Sebastian, tied to a bronze gilded column and pierced by bronze gilded arrows. At this square Herr Steiniger, one of the competitors of our firm, had his store. "You would be surprised—he is not decent at all, he does not greet any more." Presently we passed Frey's, another competitor's textile store. "He still greets, good sort."

When we finally arrived at home Mother was standing in the corridor behind the store, at the landing of the stairs. She had her kitchen apron on, which meant that she had prepared something special for me, otherwise she would have left that to Therese.

"Where did you stay so long?" she asked.

"We've made something special for you," Therese said, emerging from the kitchen.

"Pot roast and macaroni," Mother added quickly.

The table was set with shining linen. Ludwig was sitting in the living-room reading a book by B. Traven.

"Well, well, at last," Father said after we had entered the dining-room, and he gave me a hug and a kiss as if I had returned after ten years in Central Africa.

"Wow, sauerbraten and macaroni," Ludwig remarked.

"That's for you," Therese beamed.

Those were the rituals of homecoming, unvaried and precious since I had first gone into the Big City Far Away as a boy of ten, to return only on vacations. During the supper Father said that one of the apprentices in the store had joined the Storm-troopers, that Herr Ruhland had assaulted Herr Neuberger and the police had looked the other way, that Herr Gruber would not work for us any more, and that the butcher Vogl was decent.

"In the street they greet you as before"—meaning the Vogl family. It was obvious that the mankind which surrounded Father was simply divided into two breeds, those who "greeted" and those who had stopped greeting.

Doctor Marlinger was decent, Doctor Lagally did not greet any more, one Gebhardt family was friendly, the others had stopped greeting. The parish priest who had never "greeted" before began to "greet" now ostentatiously. "Awfully decent of him, that's something you've got to admit." Father, ever since I remembered him, seemed to be vaguely conscious of his naiveness; he tried to defy us and at the same time looked for approval. The human cosmos of the small town had become to him a dualist system, made up of those who kept on exchanging ordinary courtesies with him, and those who had stopped doing so. This was more involved than it sounds. "Herr Drexel stopped right on the Market Place to talk to me the other day, so, incidentally, did Doctor Marlinger." This was one step more advanced than "greeting."

"Listen to what *he* did," Mother said, referring to Father. "The Storm-troopers went around to every Jewish store and put the official labels to the show windows: 'Do not buy from the Jew!' He just went out in open daylight, in front of all the people and tore those labels off. The only Jew in town to do such a thing. They could have hanged you for that, and nobody could have done anything about it!"

"Ah, nonsense, hanging! Do you know"—he turned to me—"who the chairman and the vice-chairman of the party are?" He named two young men, both of whom happened to be sons of unmarried women from the lower class. "Take *that* as food for thought," he said.

I did not know what he wanted me to think but it occurred to me that illegitimate children in small towns are exposed to extreme and bizarre forms of humiliation, and that here the Revolution was displayed with simple crudity, with its raw flesh so-to-

speak. It seemed all too primitive for History, the faraway Goddess.

“Think of those two chaps sitting up there in an office, in upholstered easy chairs, and with secretaries,” he said.

Before we all retired Ludwig went downstairs into a niche near the cellar door and pulled a switch. Mother explained that he had installed a gadget by which he could interrupt the current of the doorbell during the night. There were people in the neighborhood who stuck matches or putty into the bell button at any hour in the morning between one and seven, and we were no longer in any position to ask for the protection of the police.

I lay awake for some time listening to the sound of the running water in Saint Florian’s fountain. I had a sense of foreboding. The feeling I had that night seems now much more natural and less strange than it actually was, because of the many things that came about since then. In reality, nothing very much had happened at that time. That there were some people in town who stopped to say hello; that there was a showcase with pornographic leaflets, or that there were some big posters on display; that there were hooligans ringing doorbells—all this was of the order of nuisance and bother, with just a touch of the vulgar and unsavory. It seems trivial in the light of intervening memories. Yet that night—I cannot explain why—I suddenly sensed that all this would end only with our complete and utter destruction.

I looked through the window. Nothing could be seen. It was the same sleepily quaint little town, under a night sky. And yet it was as if we were huddling on the barque of our childhood, and around us there was an evil force which seemed to be in tune with infinity.