

Young Jewish Communists in Weimar and Nazi Germany

By Stefanie Schüler-Springorum

In the spring of 1924, the barely 15-year-old Rudi Arndt, son of the director of the Jewish Middle School for Girls in Berlin, was so tormented by his identity problems that he turned to the head of his youth group *Kameraden*, a German-Jewish hiking group, in search of help. He wrote that “after truthful and intensive soul-searching,” he felt “neither Jewish nor German”. Therefore he had decided to leave the movement. Having done this, however, he missed the personal ties with the members of his youth group. The longing for these relationships had become so intense that his inner sense of belonging had soon re-emerged, but at the same time he was bothered by his ideological inconsistency, and now hoped that the head of his movement would show him a way out of this dilemma. Unfortunately his reply is not available. We know, however, that far from leaving the group, by 1927 Rudi Arndt had climbed the ladder in the movement hierarchy and become a charismatic leader of a Berlin *Kameraden* group. One year later he was appointed a Communist youth functionary, and in 1932 he went underground. He was arrested in October 1933 and in 1940, as a so-called “Elder” of the “Jewish Block,” he was murdered in the Buchenwald concentration camp. In the GDR (German Democratic Republic), Rudi Arndt was one of the most important icons of the Communist resistance movement. Youth hostels and schools were named after him and special stamps issued in his honour. In Western Germany, North America and in Israel he is almost completely unknown.

In many respects, Arndt’s story is typical of a relatively small but significant group of German-Jewish Communists socialized in the Jewish youth movement who subsequently found their way to the Communist Party on more or less tortuous paths. Until recently, historiography has not dealt with their complex biographies in an adequate manner.

STEFANIE SCHÜLER-SPRINGORUM was born in 1962 in Hamburg, Germany. She studied Modern History, Ethnology and Political Science at the Universities of Göttingen, Germany and Barcelona, Spain, and received her PhD at the University of Bochum, Germany in 1993. From 1994-2001 she undertook various research projects on German-Jewish history and the history of National Socialism. Since 2001 she has been Director of the Institute for German-Jewish History in Hamburg, and since 2007 Professor at Hamburg University.

In the GDR, respect was paid to them as antifascists and resistance fighters, but their activities in the Jewish movements were considered as youthful “errors.” On the other hand, in the literature on German-Jewish history they are in most instances



The Königsberg *Kameraden* group, the core of the later *Schwarzer Haufen*, on the Baltic Shore.

mentioned only as prominent examples highlighting the danger of “red assimilation”. It is time, however, to make a plea for their reintegration into Jewish history and for their perception as one of numerous possible responses to the process of self-discovery of Jewish youth in modernity. Therefore, I would like to reconstruct the typical development of these young people from the Jewish youth movement to the Communist Party by describing a small splinter group of *Kameraden* whose life stories are quite typical of the history of German-Jewish Communists in the 20th century.

My narrative could start in the well-known and notorious *Scheunenviertel*, a densely populated Berlin neighbourhood with massive poverty, squalor and obvious identity conflicts in the mostly still traditional immigrant Jewish families. A strikingly large number of later Communists came from such families, and this also applies to the group I want to analyze here. If we accept that membership in the Communist Party at a later stage was, among other things, the reflection of a conflict with one’s parents that nearly always resulted in a radical break with the family, the memoirs of childhood and youth support the hypothesis that this break occurred much earlier: an extremely large number of (auto)biographical accounts mention authoritarian fathers, some of whom were even physically abusive and often determined to force their children into occu-

pations they did not desire to engage in. Thus many young people drew radical conclusions and left their families at an early age. It is hardly surprising that the youth movement took on an almost existential significance as a surrogate family for many of these children, offering them a real sense of belonging.

In 1925, Jewish proletarian youngsters met in this neighbourhood with radical middle-class youth from other German cities to form the so-called *Schwarzer Haufen* group (SH), a leftist subgroup of the *Kameraden*. The SH established itself as the most radical non-Zionist version of the Jewish youth movement, and soon became home for politically involved young people from other cities who at the same time were seeking a Jewish framework. In addition, they skilfully styled themselves as anti-bourgeois and “wild,” in a way that provoked parents and teachers. They considered themselves an elite, and at the same time began to develop certain mystical and sectarian characteristics typical of youth movements of the twenties. Smoking was forbidden, as was meat-eating, and they fiercely discussed whether bourgeois customs like piano-playing or ballroom dancing should be prohibited as well.

This radical group either fascinated or deterred young people, and at the same time the strong moral cohesion shaped its members: one was either for or against, inside or outside. This claim to absoluteness led to endless conflicts with other, more moderate groups within *Kameraden* and ultimately to the exclusion of SH in 1927. One controversial issue leading to this break deserves mention here: the burning question regarding the attitude towards Judaism, and specifically whether or not to leave the Jewish community. It should be remembered that the Communist Party demanded that its members leave any religious congregation they belonged to. In letters discussing these issues, these young future Communists formulated an attitude toward Judaism that, so it seems, remained valid for years to come, as later texts, in particular their memoirs, suggest. Fritz Sauer of Hanover, for instance, gave the following explanation for quitting the Jewish community: “Religious communities are institutions of the bourgeois state that can be fought against only from outside.” However, he continued, “sociologically” he remained a Jew and this fact was an “unproblematic matter of course” for him. Others stressed the fact that such a step, in view of the minority status of Jews, had a different significance than for Catholics or Protestants. For this reason, Sauer wrote, and particularly out of respect for his parents, he had not yet taken this step. He empha-

sized that he continued being a “very conscious Jew” and did not have the slightest intention of “separating himself from Judaism,” certainly not of “denying it.”

The issue of leaving the Jewish community was only one controversy that finally led to the exclusion of the SH. After that, the group continued to exist as an autonomous *Bund Jüdischer Jugend* (Jewish Youth Bund), but in fact the call for political involvement had long since begun to undermine its youth movement foundations. Members who had

already joined the Communist Youth Organization of Germany (KJVD) advocated that everyone follow their steps. These lengthy and excruciating discussions in the end led to the dissolution of the SH in 1928. This separation was often a traumatic experience for the many young people for whom the *Bund* had been the main community in their lives. Almost everyone felt

the need to establish new ties as quickly as possible, or “to find a cause, a group, an organization to continue the worthy struggle.” Many joined radical left-wing splinter groups, while the majority became members of the Communist Party—if they did not belong to these groupings already.

They did so according to the principle “go for it all,” as the prestige of the Communist Party of Germany as the most radical left-wing party, its clear-cut profile and focused concept of the enemy were particularly attractive for young people. In view of the fact that until 1929 both the Communist Youth Organization and the Socialist Workers Youth imitated the youth movement in style and appearance, it is not surprising that many former youth movement members considered their step a seemingly smooth, and politically more consistent, continuation of their previous involvement in Jewish youth organizations. Furthermore, the need for closeness and community could easily be met by the young Communists, as most of them remained together in groups after their youth-movement phase, the only difference being that these were Communist now, as the example of the Berlin KJVD group shows.

Even if relationships now centred around the Communist Party, old friendships from the Jewish youth movement continued beyond political frontiers. This closeness based on common youth experience was to receive a completely new significance after 1933, when people were plunged into illegality and exposed to persecution literally from one day to another: “When general confidence had suddenly been shattered, one turned to people whose loyalty one could count on.” This was of paramount importance to the underground activities against the

It is important to note that the first and fierce onslaught against the left, a wave of arrests starting in 1933 with thousands of victims, was directed against them as political activists, and not as Jews.

continued on following page

Nazis, as the diverse friendships, family ties and romantic relationships linking young people with each other served as a basis for the consistency of their underground cells.

It is important to note, though, that the first and fierce onslaught against the left, a wave of arrests starting in 1933 with thousands of victims, was directed against them as political activists, and not as Jews. As Jews, then, they were often treated worse than their non-Jewish fellow prisoners. Among the young people of the SH, the first member was killed as early as May 1933 in Dachau, where five years later one of its former leaders and famous Berlin lawyer Hans Litten took his own life, having survived five years of torture and slave labour in various camps on German soil.

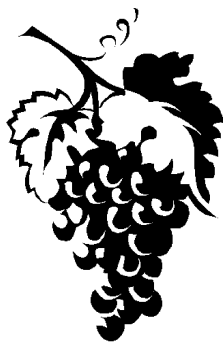
In the beginning of 1934, most former SH members were held in custody in Germany. Most of them, however, were released over the next two years. While some tried to leave Germany as fast as they could, not a few of them decided to stay in order to continue their illegal work for the Communist Party inside Germany. Nevertheless, by 1938 it had become clear to even the staunchest Jewish Communist that there was no more resistance work to be continued inside Germany and that one could serve the Party better in exile. In the mid-thirties this could mean, for example, joining the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War—as many did—or looking for refuge in the Soviet Union,

where they were immediately confronted with the traumatic atmosphere of the Stalinist purges. Now old friendships, particularly Jewish ones, often had murderous repercussions: mere contact in the past with a person on trial often meant that Jewish involvement in a person's youth was equated with "Zionism," "Trotskyism" and "Cosmopolitanism"—with all the fatal consequences. Two of the former SH members, among them Fritz Sauer from Hanover, were shot in 1938, while out of twenty or so consigned to the Gulag, a few female and only two male members survived.

For those members of the former youth group still imprisoned, or imprisoned again, inside Germany, the outbreak of the war and the ensuing onset of genocide amounted to a death penalty. I have already mentioned that Rudi Arndt, a prisoner since 1933, was murdered in Buchenwald. His funeral at the Jewish cemetery in Berlin in the summer of 1940 turned into a small illegal demonstration in the heart of Nazi Germany, which at this moment was at the peak of its power over Europe. Four friends of the SH were able to attend, and all of them would soon go underground in Berlin in order not to be picked up and sent to concentration camps. Three survived, while the fourth, Lothar Cohn, was killed in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1944. He was the last member of the SH to perish in Germany. Today a street in East Berlin carries his name, and there is still a Rudi Arndt Street and a Hans Litten street. Curiously enough, after 1989 having been a Jewish communist now—finally—turned into something positive: While all the other names of Communist martyrs were purged from the streets of the former German Democratic Republic, the new Western government did not dare to touch the Jews among them—a final posthumous selection that all of them, convinced communists that they were, would have strongly opposed.

It is striking that many of those who finally made their choice for Communism experienced a "warming-up" phase in the Jewish youth movement. What we witness here was a reinforcement of a "secular, but natural Jewishness" and what Arno Paucker once described as the "Jewish subconsciousness" of the left. This state of mind was transferred via old friendships and family relationships, and it left its mark on the rest of their lives. Indeed, new research shows that it has also—to varying degrees, but across the board—affected the lives of the children and grandchildren of those who happened to survive the persecutions of the nineteen thirties and forties. They had fought against German fascism as Communists and as Jews from the early 1930s on, and most of them were dead or in exile even before the war started. In my view, they deserve to be remembered with honour and respect, just like the young Ghetto Fighters from Warsaw, with many of whom they shared not only their educational and ideological background but also their strong commitment to the cause. ♦

***Rosh Hashonah Greetings
from Montreal,
with best wishes
for peace in the New Year.***



**STEPHEN BLOCK
MOISHE DOLMAN
DOVID & BARBARA KUNIGIS
SAM LEVY
NAOMI PALTIEL LOWI
REUVEN SCHULTZ
RAY SHANKMAN**