

A Good Jew and a Good German

The rise and fall of Ignatz Bubis

by Leonard Sax



Though he took his message—that one can be both a good Jew and a good German—to more than 200,000 German schoolchildren, played a significant role in winning international support for German reunification, and even was encouraged to run for president of the Federal Republic, Ignatz Bubis died a year ago August believing he had not achieved much for Germany or for the Jewish people.

Bubis, the son of Yiddish-speaking parents, always regarded himself as thoroughly German. “You cannot easily abandon the language and culture you loved as a child,” he once wrote.

“Despite the Holocaust, this German culture is first and foremost what makes it worthwhile for me to live in Germany.”

In 1935, two years after Hitler came to power, eight-year-old Ignatz and his family moved from their hometown of Breslau (in eastern Germany) to Deblin, in Poland, to live with relatives. Four years later, when the Germans invaded Poland, the family was forced into a Jewish ghetto. Bubis’ mother Hanna died of cancer in 1940. In 1941, his brother Jakob and sister Hadassah were taken by the Nazis. In 1942, Bubis watched as his father was deported to the Treblinka death camp, never

Bubis and Chancellor Helmut Kohl attend the 1995 opening of Berlin's Jewish Center.

EDWARD SEROTTA PHOTOS

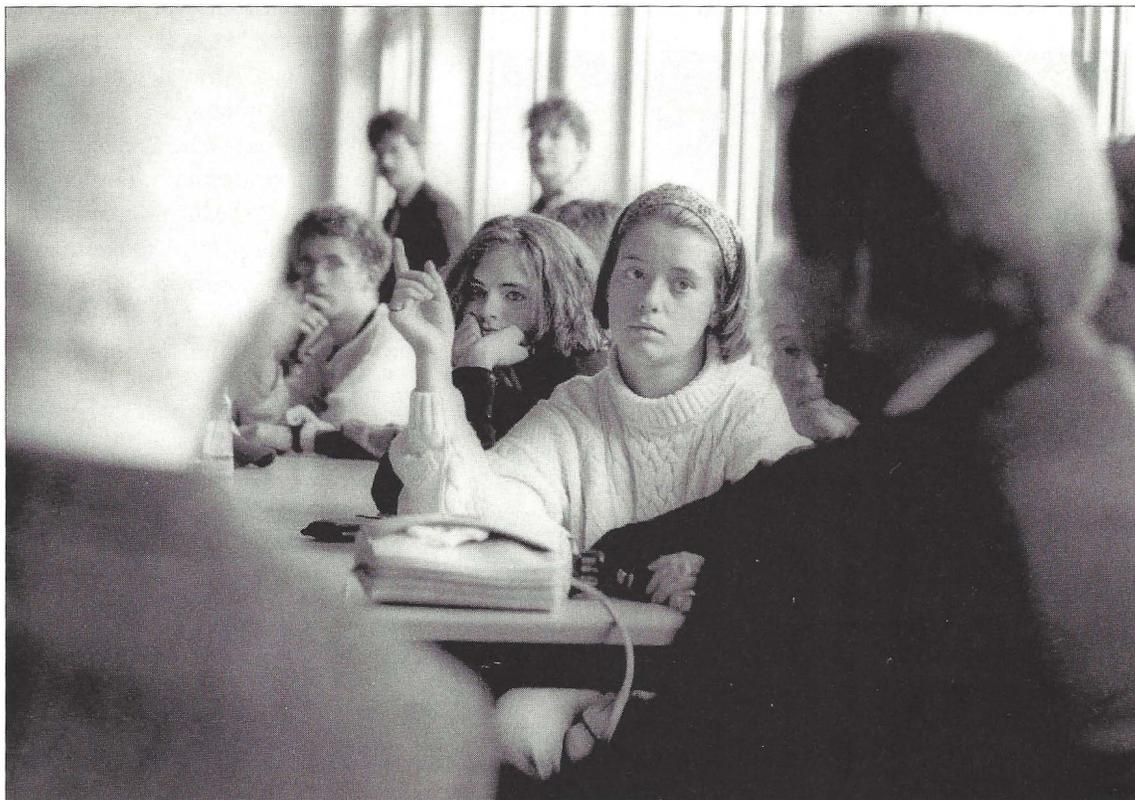
to return. Bubis spent the next three years in two Nazi slave-labor camps, the first near Deblin, the second in Czestochowa. After this camp was liberated by the Soviet Army in January 1945, Bubis was interned in a series of displaced persons camps, including the huge DP camp in Berlin—from which he escaped after just three nights.

Bubis made his way to Dresden, having heard that food was plentiful there. He traded vodka and cigarettes (which he had acquired in the DP camps) for food. Returning to Berlin, he bartered the food for jewelry, which he then exchanged in Dresden for more food.

Fyodor Woischnitz, the Russian commander

Bubis had attracted unfavorable attention from the German radical left.

Filmmaker and playwright Rainer Werner Fassbinder—best known for his movies, including *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and *The Marriage of Maria Braun*—wrote a play whose main character was a caricature of Bubis. *Garbage, the City, and Death* explored the life of a “rich Jew” who had survived the Holocaust and gone on to make a fortune exploiting the guilt of his fellow Germans in dishonest real estate deals. Because Bubis was the only prominent Jewish Holocaust survivor brokering German real estate in the 1970s, critics assumed—probably correct-



of the Dresden district, took a liking to Bubis. For three years, Bubis traveled with a special pass, exempting him from searches by Russian police.

But in 1948, after Woischnitz was recalled to Russia, Bubis was arrested and imprisoned for two weeks. Upon release, he fled to Stuttgart where he established a small jewelry business. Eight years later he married and moved to Frankfurt, where he opened a larger jewelry store. The store became so successful that, by the early 1960s, he was able to begin building a real estate empire, which ultimately controlled extensive holdings throughout Europe. By the early 1970s,

ly—that Fassbinder had Bubis in mind.

Fassbinder died in 1982 at the age of 37 before the play had attracted much public attention. In one scene from the play an ethnic German says, “That Jew sucks us dry. He drinks our blood and makes us feel as though we’re in the wrong, just because he’s a Jew and we bear the burden of guilt.... I can’t sleep at night.... The Jew is guilty, because he makes us feel guilty just by the fact of his being here. I wish he would have stayed where he came from. If only they had gassed him, then I’d be able to sleep better now. They forgot to gas him [*Sie haben vergessen, ihn zu vergasen*]. That’s

Bubis speaking to German schoolchildren about Jewish life in their country before World War II.

Marked only by paper prior to its unveiling, Bubis' Israeli gravesite was vandalized by a Jew.

no joke, that's what I really think. And I rub my hands [in glee] when I imagine him suffocating in the gas chamber."

At the end of the play, a prostitute—the "rich Jew's" only real human contact—tells him she wants to die. "I'm sick of the role I have to play," she says. The Jew takes off his tie and—in full view of the audience—strangles her.

The first attempt to produce Fassbinder's play on a German stage came in 1985, three years after the playwright's death. Bubis pleaded with theater manager Günther Rühle to cancel the production: to no avail. In desperation, Bubis

"Are you German or are you Jewish?" "*Ich bin ein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischer Glaubens*" [I am a German citizen; my religion is Judaism], he always answered. "German citizens can be Catholic or Protestant," he added, "Why can't they be Jewish" and pose no threat?

On the political scene, Bubis played a significant role in the reunification of Germany. In 1990 he told audiences in Europe and the United States that a reunified Germany would enhance prospects for continued peace. Opponents of reunification found themselves at a disadvantage. If Ignatz Bubis, a Holocaust survivor who had lost

his family to the Nazis, favored reunification, then what moral standing did they have to oppose it? Chancellor Helmut Kohl later commended Bubis for having "provided an important and lasting service as the highest representative and most important spokesman of the Jewish community in Germany.... As a German patriot of the Jewish faith, he was an ambassador for our country



sought a restraining order. The court rejected his motion. On the play's opening night, Oct. 31, 1985, Bubis (along with about 30 supporters) entered the theater, occupied the stage, and refused to leave. After a two-hour standoff, Rühle told ticket-holders to go home.

The dispute became an international cause célèbre. The Israeli Knesset (parliament) passed a resolution on Nov. 4, 1985, calling on Frankfurt city officials to ban the play. A week later, the production was canceled. Rühle explained that he could not guarantee the safety of theatergoers.

Even Germans who disagreed with Bubis were impressed by his courage and determination. Exploiting his notoriety, Bubis embarked on a speaking tour. He especially welcomed opportunities to speak at schools: not primarily to talk about the Holocaust (although he did that too), but mainly to tell children about German Jews who helped to shape modern German culture such as writers Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka, and Lion Feuchtwanger.

"But what are you?" the children would ask.



throughout the world...."

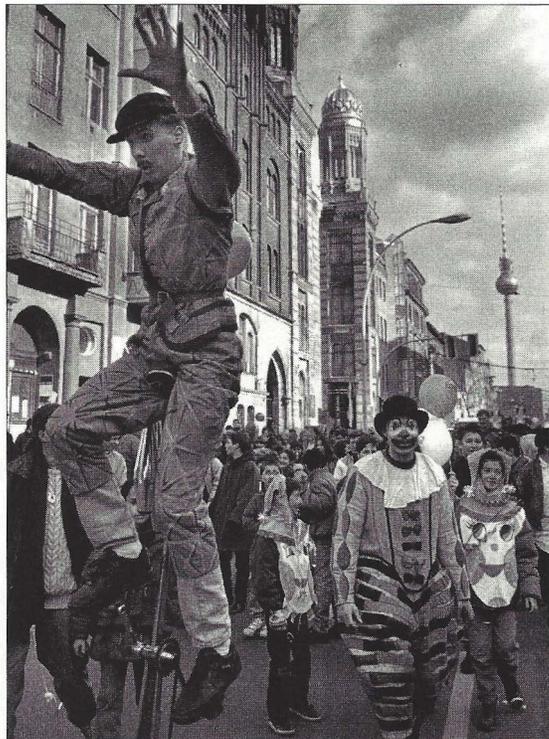
Thus, the man who made his public debut in an act of civil disobedience became a moral authority of international stature. In 1992 his name was circulated as a candidate for president of Germany. Bubis declined to seek the honor, saying, "I don't think that our country is ready for a Jew to be president of the Federal Republic."

Also in 1992, Bubis accepted the chairmanship of the Central Council of German Jews. Bubis hoped to promote dialogue between Orthodox Jews and more liberal Conservative or Reform Jews. Bubis' protégé Michel Friedman, a leader of the Berlin Jewish community and a member of the Central Council of German Jews, said that "Bubis tried to encourage the idea of a

A Berlin Purim parade highlights the revival of Jewish life in Germany for which Bubis fought.

single Jewish community. We must have tolerance and openness, he insisted, otherwise our Jewish community will splinter and fall apart. He restored to the German Jewish community a feeling of self-worth and an awareness of itself."

But Bubis had his critics even among Jews. Some leaders of Germany's Reform and Conservative communities regard him as having hurt their cause. One example was Bubis' refusal to take sides when Germany's Central Council, which disperses funds to "established religious congregations," denied support to the two relatively young movements after being lobbied by



the Orthodox movement. (Reform and Conservative have only been organizing in Germany since the late 1980s.) Bubis said, "We want to keep religious issues separate from political issues. That is the absolute consensus of members of the Central Council."

During the peak years of Bubis' influence—from 1992 to 1998—Chancellor Helmut Kohl frequently consulted Bubis on matters relating to the German Jewish community, and on Germany's policies toward Israel. Bubis accompanied Kohl on a 1995 visit to Israel. Honors approaching those reserved for a head of state were accorded Bubis on travels abroad.

In the fall of 1998, however, everything began to fall apart. In October, German writer Martin

Walser complained that the Holocaust was being used by the international community as "a routine threat, a tool of intimidation, a moral cudgel." Walser cited as an example the German government's attempt to tighten its liberal asylum policies in 1992. This action provoked international protest, although the revised German asylum policy was still more generous than many other Western countries. Germany was being held to a "higher standard," Walser believed, because of the legacy of the Holocaust. We have fulfilled our time of national shame, Walser said. It is time to move on. No longer should German children, or the present-day German government, be saddled with guilt for the Holocaust.

Bubis immediately denounced Walser as an "intellectual arsonist." German writers sprang to Walser's defense. The battle raged for three months in heated public letters, speeches, and editorials. Surveys showed not only that 90 percent of Germans agreed with Walser, but, more ominously, that 40 percent agreed with the statement, "Jews have too much power," and 22 percent said they would not want to have a Jew as a neighbor. But what troubled Bubis most, according to his longtime friend Friedman, was not Walser's speech nor the public's support for Walser, but, rather, that so many people whom Bubis considered friends and allies sided with Walser.

It was during this period that Bubis' health began to fail. After two operations for painful back and neck problems, he was diagnosed with bone cancer and developed a blood clot in his leg. In a final interview with the German magazine *Stern* four weeks before his death, Bubis expressed doubt that his work to integrate Jews into German society had made any difference. "I have accomplished nothing, or almost nothing," he said. "I wanted to do away with the lines of demarcation separating us: Germans on this side, Jews over there. I thought maybe I could do it: maybe people could learn to think differently about one another. But no: I've had almost zero impact. We remain strangers to one another.... Bury me in Israel," he added, "because I don't want my grave to be desecrated, as Heinz Galinski's was." (The gravesite of Galinski, Bubis' predecessor as chairman of the Central Council, was blown up in January 1998. The perpetrators have never been found.)

When Ignatz Bubis died on August 13, 1999,

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former German President Roman Herzog announced that “our country has lost a great German. His death fills me with enormous sorrow.” Lufthansa provided a special plane to fly Bubis’ casket to Tel Aviv. Many of Germany’s highest political figures attended the funeral.

But the irony was inescapable: The man who devoted his life to the proposition that Jews belong in Germany chose to be buried in Israel. To compound the irony, an Israeli—Meir Mendelssohn—vandalized the grave, spraying it with black paint. Mendelssohn claimed that Bubis was a traitor to Judaism. Israeli authorities declined to press charges.

Ignatz Bubis tried for 50 years to prove that one could be both German and Jewish. In the end, he believed he had failed.

Others do not share Bubis’ gloomy assessment of his career. On Sept. 14, 1999, a memorial service was held in Bubis’ own West End Synagogue in Frankfurt. Over 1,000 invited guests were present, including President Johannes Rau, the entire German cabinet, leaders of all four major political parties, several Catholic bishops, and the chairman of the German Islamic Council. The minister-president of the state of Hesse, Roland Koch, was among those who remarked that Bubis had been a living bridge between Jews and non-Jews in Germany.

The featured speaker was Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who praised Ignatz Bubis as a role model for all Germans. Schröder commended Bubis for helping “to build up a new moral foundation for Germany.” Chancellor Schröder—along with every other speaker at the memorial—disagreed with Bubis’ own evaluation of his career: “Ignatz Bubis achieved a very great deal,” Schröder said in closing his remarks. “I bow my head before his memory.”

Dr. Leonard Sax is a physician and psychologist practicing in Maryland.

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