CHAPTER ONE

CELEBRATING SPINOZA

One of the many reasons Weimar Germany has become a source for nostalgia were the capital’s coffee houses. A Berliner sitting in one of those cafés at the end of November 1932 had momentous events to discuss. The young democratic Republic, of which his city was the capital, was on its last legs. It seemed that the attempt at German democracy, the outcome of the loss of the Great War, was, only fourteen years after the signing of its Constitution in Weimar, bound to fail. Politics had reached a stalemate. A few weeks before, on the 6th of November, there had been elections for the Reichstag; it was the fifth time in one year the citizens of the Weimar Republic had been asked to go to the ballot. These elections had been important, as the threat to the Republic by Adolf Hitler was becoming ever more serious. Negotiations with his anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, National-Socialist party, had been going on since he had been invited to join the Cabinet in the preceding summer. The only reason he was not yet in Government was that he had refused the invitation. After the elections, on November 19th, Reich-President Hindenburg again asked Hitler to join the Government.1 The prime enemy of the Republic, however, only used these invitations to further undermine the stability of Weimar’s fragile political system. While some politicians hoped to use his success for their own purposes, Hitler himself used these politicians to gain respectability. It was a game he had been playing since the elections of 14th September, 1930, when, with 18.3% of the vote, he became too big to be ignored.2 However, the outcome of the elections of November 6th made this period critical also for Hitler, whose party’s triumphal advance in the polls had come to a halt. For the first time since the sudden electoral success of 1930, the party failed to increase its percentage of votes; it even dropped a few percentage points from 37.3% to 33.1%. Momentum and growth were essential for the appeal of the National-Socialist movement; the

disappointing results of this election caused a crisis in Hitler’s party. We now know that Hitler succeeded in stalling the negotiations until two months later, when he was awarded the Chancellorship, which he used to bring the Weimar Republic to an end. At that time, such a scenario was only a possibility.

If our Berliner happened to be Jewish, it is likely he would have worried about the possible consequences these events could have for him. The Government, in theory, protected the Jewish minority as never before but, in practice, seemed not capable of the task. If he read some of the many Jewish newspapers published in Germany at the time, he would certainly have found articles on debates within the Jewish community on how to deal with the challenges facing the Republic. He would read about the question of how dangerous a threat Hitler was, and on the growing number of anti-Semitic incidents taking place at the time.

Sipping his coffee and reading his paper, however, he would notice that the subject covered most extensively in all the Jewish press was not news on the struggle for life of the Republic in which he lived, nor on the implications of this struggle for the Jews. Instead, the papers were dominated by a figure who lived three centuries before the Weimar Republic. A figure who had been fiercely rejected by the Jewish community when he lived, but who now appeared to be warmly embraced by the Jews of a new era. On November 24th, 1932, 300 years had passed since the birth of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Almost all the Jewish newspapers had chosen to make this event their main “news”; they devoted the largest and most prominent sections of their pages to the celebration of this jubilee.

Let us assume that our Berliner read the CV-Zeitung. This is a likely guess, as this weekly was one of the most widely read Jewish newspapers at the time. It was estimated that it had some 60,000 subscribers in 1931. Although as a Jewish newspaper it was aimed at a Jewish audience, it spread a message of Jewish integration into German society. This newspaper was published by the Centralverein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith), which aimed “to cultivate Jewish life and to counsel the Jews living in Germany on spiritual, legal and economic matters,

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