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(In February, 1965, Commentary published a provocative article by George Steiner entitled "A Kind of Survivor". We present here a series of reactions to Steiner's definition of his Jewishness.)

'A Kind of Survivor'

What Steiner Said

Summary and Analysis

BY PAUL HAMBURG

"A Kind of Survivor" is first of all a powerful personal document. It describes introspectively a certain marginal Jewish identity. For Steiner, being a Jew is central to his self-definition. The collective tragedy of European Jewry is the perspective of his past; the intellectual dynamism of emancipated Jewry in Prague, Vienna, and Berlin is his cultural heritage; the liberal humanism of the European Jewish intelligentsia is his political credo; the social alienation of European Jewry is the progenitor of his place in English society; the historical consciousness of the Jew is the source of his introspection. Most important, the memory of a time when the world turned against the Jew forms a boundary for intellect and action; it prevents security, complacency, and further assimilation.

Steiner is a man for whom Judaism does not mean a religion, in terms of ritual or practise. He is a man for whom political humanism represents his personal Jewishness more plausibly than Israeli nationalism. His Judaism is a memory of a culture which was no longer Jewish *per se* but was a confluence of Jewish culture with Western forms, language, and society. A generation of Central European Jews grew up with the emancipating thoughts of Freud,

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the criticism of Karl Kraus, the strangely personal music of Mahler. That culture no longer exists; however, the manner and the fact of its extinction reinforce its Jewishness. This generation, saturated with European culture, perhaps barely conscious of the special nature of the Jewish intelligentsia, experienced the camps. It is from among this generation that the "survivors" Steiner speaks of were selected. For them, the culture of assimilated Jewry, which was fast blending indistinguishably into European culture, can blend no more. And, a return to the Judaism of two or three generations before, a retreat from emancipation, is also an impossible denial of their identity. As the Israeli quickly condemns Steiner's idealistic aloofness, the Orthodox, his ignorance of traditional Judaism, or the rationalist, his paroxysmal bond with the past, it is all too easy to overlook the central coherence of Steiner's position. First of all, it is a real position, not only Steiner's but that of all prodigal sons for whom the holocaust was a paradoxical return to Judaism. Nor do I believe that Steiner's position is confined to one generation. The sense of personal alienation, the cultural internationalism, and the feeling of history as an inner substitute for a homeland are not absent from the thoughts of younger generations. Finally, it is a position that looks to the past not in paralysis but in search of a new synthesis.

To argue that Steiner's self-definition is not "Jewish" is facile, for what does such an argument really mean? One can insist that the work of Kafka, Proust, or Bergson, in the modes and languages of the West, is not part of Jewish culture. But if one reads the reaction of Kafka to the arrival of the Yiddish theatre in Prague, Proust's letters during the Dreyfus case, Bergson's refusal to avow his Catholicism during the Nazi times, one can see that the passage of these men away from Judaism was by no means complete, and more important, one notices the crucial significance to their intellect of this incomplete passage. Throughout their lives their relationship to Judaism was a central fact of their identity, and their alienation from general society as Jews, by their own or by others' definition, was a central fact of their lives. This marginal intelligentsia, alienated from both Judaism and national culture, was immensely productive, and the nature of its production reflects its alienation.

Such a culture is entirely an element of the Diaspora. The compensations for homelessness—political independence, supra-national

perspective, historical self-consciousness, linguistic sensitivity, a broader perception—these are its tools. Its life in imbalance is its goad to creation. In a Jewish state, there no longer exists a possibility for such a life. The marginal cultures of European Jewry, Yiddish literature in the East, and the foment of the middle-European intelligentsia cannot continue in Israel, because they were bound intrinsically to the fact of Diaspora.

For those Jews like Steiner, whose Jewishness is inalienably linked to the cultures and ideologies of the Diaspora, no matter how crucial the building of a Jewish society in Israel may be for their continued existence, for the perpetuation of Judaism, it is nonetheless alien, more alien by far than an inevitably insecure, inevitably rootless life outside. For them, the often ugly realities of a national ideology do not reflect the inspiring Messianic vision whose meaning was bound to intangibility.

For the future, Steiner finds a creative place for the secular Jew in Western society. In the memory of the extermination camps there is a perpetual force to set the Jew apart, despite his intimate participation in the social and intellectual life of his country. From this position of involved detachment, he can exert a potently progressive, supra-national influence in politics, art and social reform. Steiner does not insist that this life is particularly Jewish; what he does suggest is that it is a suitable life for a Jew who is in the precarious position of being physically and spiritually a survivor, that this life retains distinctiveness, a certain Jewish heritage, and incorporates the imponderable memory of the holocaust to create, finally, a positive self-consciousness.

'A Kind of Survivor'

A Search for Security

BY ANDREW GREYSTOKE

For the Jew as an individual, the problem of survival is similar to that faced by every individual in his attempt to master his environment. The Jew, however, is also concerned for the survival of his neighbors, of other Jews, more fundamentally than the average Englishman must be concerned for the survival of other Englishmen. Since in every age Jews have been persecuted, not for their acts or their beliefs but for their existence, every Jew must be conscious of the problem of collective survival.

It is not helpful, however, to regard persecution as an absolute, as an invariant preconditioning factor for all Jews in all generations; the proximity of the danger is a vital determinant, and it is here that I, as an English Jew whose parents did not know persecution, take issue with Professor Steiner. Perhaps it is that I am his child, writing a generation later, but the problems that he proposes and attempts to deal with as a survivor are not my problems.

As a refugee in a generation of refugees, working in an environment in which many of the most brilliant are survivors of the European holocaust, one can easily assume that there is a profound significance in being a survivor, that the lessons of survival can be understood in the context of that group and its experience.

For the generation left behind, for those whose names were omitted from the death scrolls, the alternatives left open were conditioned by their memory of those who died and by their own narrow escape. They were escapees, concerned above all about what they had escaped from, rather than the perils of the future,

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which might be of a totally different kind. Analysis of the future only in terms of a past that would never recur, however typical of a historical pattern it might be, could not provide a constructive solution to the problems of the future.

Danger is not proximate to me. I know intellectually of the horrors of the camps in the same way as I know of the terrors of the Inquisition, of the torture chambers of Algeria during my adolescence, or of the bestiality in Vietnam which I live through each morning at the breakfast table. I know that had I been a Vietnamese, an Algerian, or were I a Russian Jew today, I would be directly in the path, but I am not.

There is an enormous concern for the welfare of the Jew everywhere as part of the community of suffering. A people chosen to suffer makes a specialty of suffering, refines it to a high level of purity, and ultimately seeks it second-hand through concern for the suffering of the Jew, or of others, through charity. But however concerned I might be for the suffering of others, I do not suffer. The lessons of history tell me that I must be on the list again at some stage, either me or my children's children, but these lessons do not tell me when. Therefore, I must seek a type of security that will protect not merely me but also my children; no kind of social or financial security can be sufficient. If nothing else, the lesson of the holocaust is the vanity of all attempts to buy off persecution.

I do not know how much the wise man profits from the lessons of his ancestors or how much one can condition one's behavior by historical antecedents. The death of European Jewry did not happen to me, nor did it happen to my parents or their friends. It happened to my grandparents, and it is history; it will condition my behavior as an external factor as much as any other trend of history.

What paths are open to me, then, not as a survivor, but as a Jew living in the second half of the twentieth century, aware of the ultimate likelihood of persecution, desperate for security, and at the same time treasuring the values of the society I live in?

I have absorbed the culture in which I live and absorbed it willingly. The poetry and drama of the western world are important to me, and I would not want to lose them. They have conditioned me and prevent me now from retiring to the ghetto. I doubt that I could survive in a totally Jewish community; in this sense the process of enlightenment has cut me off from a fully Jewish life. It is too late for Jews to turn again into cultural ostriches. It is also

too late for Israel to be a Jewish state in the complete sense of the term. Is there anyone who would really have an Israel populated entirely by Jews oblivious to the contributions of Western civilization and technology?

Before turning to the relation between Israel and the contemporary Jew, it is well to analyse the religious issue more fully. It has often been said that Judaism is more than a religion—it is a way of life. But this does not merely mean that it has a legal framework which governs every daily action and links it to an ancient theology. It means that there is within Judaism in addition to religious precepts a complete set of cultural values and ideas. The great contribution of Jews to Western civilization is not an accident; nor, do I believe, is it “the sharpening of wit against the whetstone of persecution.” It is a reflection of the high place of learning in Jewish culture; regardless of external events, Jews have a deeply seated love of learning for its own sake; despite the strong connection of study and religion, the two can be distinguished. It is not necessary to have access to the prayers and religious practices of Judaism to feel an attachment to Jewish cultural values.

In my opinion, one of the tasks of the Jew today is to learn the meaning of Judaism, not necessarily by recourse to the prayerbook, but by turning to the vast literature of the past. Much of this literature is available in western languages; more is constantly appearing in translation. Until a new generation of writers can produce a meaningful appreciation of Judaism, it is to the writers of the past that we must turn for an understanding of what it is to be a Jew. They, too, faced the same problems, fought persecution; each generation had its rebels, and in each generation there were men like Maimonides who succeeded in living Judaism while continuing to live a full life in the gentile community. This, then, is one alternative open to us—not a return to ritual but a return to traditional Jewish values as a guide to life in modern society.

Israel, lacking in what Professor Steiner calls dynamic humanism, is the prisoner of its own nationalism. Again, my reaction is against the survivor as spectator. It is the task of every person to find his purpose and to endeavor to alter the environment in this direction. I cannot accept a criticism of Israeli nationalism without some proposal to alter it. I doubt whether I shall live in Israel, but I do know that I would hate to be a Jew in a world without Israel. Aware of the possibility of persecution, I am grateful for the possi-

bility of refuge and in turn feel a duty to work toward the betterment of Israel. In accepting the necessity of nationalism today, I do not deny the responsibility to oppose its excesses, and I emphasize my responsibility to consider Israel as the center of a new Jewish culture, not as an expatriate Israeli, but with the view of defining a meaningful relationship between Israel and the Diaspora.

How can the proper relationship between a Jew and his society be defined?

Dr. Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish Congress, speaks of a need for dual loyalty to one's country of residence and to Israel. I am more concerned with dual culturism. Above all, in American society there should be room for such a combination. In England the pressure to be a typical Englishman makes it difficult to belong to any minority group; it is my impression that in America, where everyone is conscious of being a "something"-American, be it Irish-American, Italian-American, Mayflower-American, there should be room for the Judeo-American. If the Jew has something specific to contribute, then he will at the very least be tolerated, if not welcomed, and it is doubtful whether the Jew can ever ask for more than toleration as long as he seeks to maintain his identity.

I am not prepared to lose my Jewish identity, and I do not believe there is a solution in assimilation in a community that will seek us out generation after generation. Nor can there be any solution in the role of "the gadflies of Western society." The solution must be in a special contribution to the society we live in, a specially Jewish contribution. What it is I do not know. Perhaps in the Jewish family there is a model for an institution that is disintegrating in our society; but I throw this out only to indicate that somehow Jews have maintained a different mode of life from the society they live in.

To be a Jew today is to be aware of persecution as a non-imminent danger. It is not for me or for my contemporaries to be survivors. We must not be spectators but must return to our heritage, to our religion, and to our history and add to these the potential of the state of Israel. In this perspective we can gain an idea of the path we must follow to be Jews and to fulfill a productive role in the modern world, looking always to the future, rather than back to the ovens.

'A Kind of Survivor'

Citizens of the World

BY DAVID H. LEVEY

I would like to discuss two important aspects of George Steiner's article: the historical relation of Judaism to Western European culture and the problem of Israeli nationalism. The historical argument begins with two factual premises: first, that there was an intellectual revolution in western thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; second, that Jews or men of Jewish origin played an especially significant role in this revolution. Both premises are well substantiated. There has been a dramatic change in our perception and interpretation of the physical universe, the human soul, and society; and these changes are justifiably linked with the names of Marx, Freud, and Einstein. In addition to these predominant figures, Steiner is able to present an impressive list of other Jews who have contributed to the modern conception of the world.

It is not enough, however, to point to these facts. It might very well be claimed that the phenomenon is purely a contingent one, an historical coincidence not too far beyond what might be produced by purely random factors. Steiner believes, on the contrary, that there are definite reasons for the coincidence and that causal connections can be drawn between Judaism as a system of ideas, the social situation of Western European Jewry, and the contributions to secular culture. Two such connections can be distinguished. One relates the abstract rationalistic character of the result to traditions and ideas within Judaism. For example, David Bakan, in his book *Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, associates the doctrine and methods of psychoanalysis with the methods of kab-

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bala. The same point is made by those who show the analogies between the messianic tradition and the eschatological elements in Marxism. In each case, it is contended that it was significant that these intellectual innovators were Jews and that the Jewish tradition contained ideational elements which, when separated from the religious and cultural matrix in which they were imbedded, proved immensely fertile.

The second group of arguments is sociological. The Jew was essentially cosmopolitan because he lived in all countries and communicated across linguistic boundaries. Because he had been recently emancipated, he threw himself with vigor into the world of secular bourgeois culture. In rebellion against the traditions of his fathers, he was open to influences from all directions, willing to experiment outside of established frameworks. The relationship of the Jew both to the surrounding societies and to the generations of his forefathers is here the explanatory variable.

The above arguments seem to me to be sound, although in need of detailed extension. But they are liable to several misinterpretations. In the first place, several of Steiner's examples seem ill-chosen. If a man, though of Jewish or half-Jewish origin, either practices another religion or is totally unfamiliar with the traditions of Judaism, it is difficult to see how the above forces could operate upon him. This is perhaps the case with Wittgenstein (a pious Catholic), Bergson, and Proust. Second, it is easy to accuse Steiner of being ignorant of, or paying no attention to, the continuity of Jewish life and culture in Eastern Europe. The thinkers with whom he is dealing, after all, were only Jews peripherally; their primary allegiance was to wider culture. This criticism, however, is largely irrelevant; Steiner is describing the culture he knows and loves and is under no particular obligation to deal with the richness and significance of the culture he does not know of or identify with.

Finally, my friend Mr. Ben-Porath, in his comments on this same article (see below, p. 14), feels that Steiner has ascribed to the Jews a mission as intellectual saviours of humanity. I do not think that any such conception of mission is tenable, but neither do I think that it can be found in Steiner. He is describing a unique concatenation of events and persons brought about by identifiable and historically limited forces. This relationship between Jews and general society has not existed in all periods of Jewish history (although there are isolated cases such as Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn),

nor is there reason to believe that it must necessarily recur. Nothing so grandiose as an eternal mission can be made out of such limited evidence.

This bears also on the question of whether Jews of today can extract any lessons from Steiner's analysis. If he were actually positing a God-given mission, there would certainly be an implied obligation to fulfill it. But this shows directly the absurdity of the idea of a mission. How would you deliberately go about creating intellectual geniuses of a revolutionary kind? That you cannot demonstrates that the contribution of the Jews also is limited to what the laws and circumstances of history determine. This is not to say that advice and exhortation cannot be found in Steiner's article. To find them, however, one must turn to his discussion of nationalism.

"Nationalism is the venom of our age"—this is Steiner's basic feeling about the primary political institution of our times, and from it his ambiguous attitude toward Israel follows. However much he may appreciate the necessity of the Jewish state, he regrets that the Jewish people have followed the well-worn path to a nation-state bristling with arms, internal conflict, and some repression of liberty.

Certainly there is a kernel of truth in the contention that the sufferings of modern man, and especially of the Jews, are closely connected with the passions aroused by national identifications. But perhaps Steiner has made too hasty an identification between nationalism as an ideology and the nation-state as an institution. To oppose the latter in this age is to set oneself against strong historical tendencies (which is not always wrong), in the sense that the vast majority of mankind, particularly in the underdeveloped areas of the world, firmly believe, for better or worse, that the nation-state is the only institution possessing the will and organization required to create a modernized, industrialized society. Given this fact of life, lovers of peace and brotherhood, while necessarily working within the framework of the nation-state, must make every effort to prevent the usefulness of the institution from degenerating into the chauvinism and fear which presently threaten the survival of us all, Jew and non-Jew alike.

It is here that one can discern in Steiner a Jewish "mission" or task. Unlike the false idea of an "intellectual mission," this task is not usually assumed voluntarily and implies no intellectual virtue

or superiority. Steiner claims that the Jew, whether he likes it or not, is alien to the nations in which he lives, perpetually threatened (even in the U.S.) with potential destruction, intrinsically a citizen of the world not by choice but by historical destiny.

Given this *fate*, it is in his own rational self-interest, wherever he is found, to oppose nationalistic passions in the name of universal peace and brotherhood, for it is these passions of national power and conflict which have led in the recent past to the catastrophic devastation of Jewry. This is a task which can be ignored, but only at great peril. Neither is complete assimilation a safe haven. Considering the ever-possible recurrence of racial myths and categorizations, the Jew is thrust into a perilous position by his very ancestry, and it is that fact which, Steiner believes, defines the existence of all Jews and in particular of the secularized non-traditional Jew.

The answer of the Zionist to all of this is simple: return! There are two fundamental, opposite considerations which will determine a response to this exhortation. The first contains the belief that the true Jewish life can be lived only in the midst of the true Jewish community, the desire to live such a life, and the faith that God has commanded His people to come back and take up the ancient home. I agree with Steiner that the great body of American Jewry, while willing to support Israel both financially and politically, will not choose to heed the call to return.

Only after this first consideration has been rejected can the second come into play. I consider it a "utilitarian" argument, for it asserts that the Jews of the Diaspora can, in the long run, be of greater benefit to themselves, to Israel, and to the rest of the world, by remaining where they are and fighting the good fight. For the very existence of mankind is in question in an age of nuclear weapons, and American Jews are needed and are *called upon* to oppose chauvinism when it makes its appearance in the decisions of their government.

Perhaps this will still seem to some a self-definition based on pride. In any case, it is definitely not derived from the purely historical argument given above. The Jews are not called upon by Steiner to be *today or in the future* the sole or even the chief intellectual supporters of humanistic culture. They are called upon only to be true to the ancient hope: "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares . . ."

'A Kind of Survivor'

A Kind of Mission

BY YORAM BEN-PORATH

In spite of the personal tone with which George Steiner opens "A Kind of Survivor," his message is more than personal. He speaks for and to the Jew who is neither Orthodox nor Zionist, who does not go to Israel yet stays in the Diaspora for neither material nor other convenience; he provides him with a reason for staying, a kind of mission. The mission is to be the preacher and bearer of humanistic values and supra-national ideas in a world ridden with chauvinism and hatred. As an essential element of this mission, Steiner believes deeply that despite temporary periods of relief, the Jew will, in the long run, always be the outsider, the outcast, the hated. Most of Steiner's article is devoted to establishing the Jewishness of this mission, and it is to the validity of this claim that this note is devoted.

In support Steiner brings forward the names of some writers and thinkers who were the originators or bearers of humanistic values and who were also Jews, or of Jewish origin. Now, if Steiner claimed that Jews have been disproportionately represented in the propagation and defense of what we like to consider the right causes, we would not quarrel with him. Moreover, we could speculate on the chances of this continuing, although some analysis would then be called for. But when Steiner makes it a Jewish mission, assumed by him, and suggested to others, voluntarily, we have to ask three questions: 1) Were Jews the only ones who have historically assumed these roles, to the extent that without those Jews the development of western humanism would have been seriously hampered? 2) Were the people that Steiner mentions

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acting as Jews? 3) Is this mission, as it is presented, in line with Jewish culture?

The answer to the first question is too obvious to be uttered. I do not really believe that Steiner thinks that Jews have a monopoly on western humanism. The world has its own saviours, and those of Jewish origin were few of many.

Nor is the second question in need of elaborate answer. There is almost a comic element in those who are brought forward to represent Judaism—Marx and Freud! Did they regard themselves as Jews and speak as such? Did the rest of the Jewish community regard them as such? It is significant that most of those mentioned by Steiner drifted from the mainstream of Judaism; neither they themselves nor the Jewish community think of them often as Jews. To me, an Israeli “chauvinist,” it seems strange that this kind of living-room family pride that we are all guilty of, based as it is on blood ties, could be written on the banner of the cosmopolitan liberal Jew.

But this is not what we are concerned with; it is the last question which is most important. I contend that the mission that Steiner suggests for the “few who want to stay in the cold outside the sanctuary of nationalism” is alien in terms of its form, although not its content, to Jewish thought and practice. We can get to the point by looking at Steiner’s understanding of the idea of the “chosen people.” In Judaism the idea of being “chosen” was never considered as a kind of prize, given for some kind of excellence. It has been looked upon rather as the imposition of an obligation to accept and live by a certain set of values, and this is not very similar to what Steiner has in mind. The emphasis here is on *living* by certain values. Jews were never missionaries to the rest of humanity. Our efforts were always directed inwards, and there was no preaching to the rest of the world. Our mission to the rest of humanity was meant to be by way of example, a mission which puts those inward efforts in a broader framework.

This idea ties in with the way Steiner understands the existence of Israel. For him Israel is significant as a refuge. For him and the Jews of the Diaspora, it is a source of confidence and a potential haven on a rainy day. Israeli nationalism, the army, and so forth, are necessary evils, indispensable but revolting. Those who dreamt the dream of Israel and those who took part in fulfilling it (and this is where Zionists and Orthodox are not that different) thought more

of it. They thought of it in terms of the Jewish "mission," the idea that we ought to try and build something better. To the Zionist mind, complete fulfillment of Jewish life in the Diaspora is, by definition, impossible. The Jews could partially fulfill themselves through the family and the institutions available in the Jewish community, but they have been crippled by not having a state in which to build their own society. It is what we make out of what Steiner regards as necessary evils that is the challenge, the renewal of an opportunity lost for centuries.

For Steiner Jewish history starts with the Diaspora; he can think of the Jew only in terms of the wandering Jew and turns those wanderings into a mission. Again this is alien to Jewish attitudes; others did, but we have never regarded our exile and sufferings as a sacrifice that we were giving for the rest of the world. The Jew says in his prayers that "because of *our* sins we were exiled from our country." Being in the Diaspora is a punishment for not living by certain values when the opportunity was there. The opportunity is now there again.

Jewish youth in the Diaspora are faced with many challenges in the countries in which they live; and if they see themselves as belonging there, as being part of American or Russian society, they will fulfill themselves there, but only if they can tell themselves, rightly or wrongly, that it is their own, that they are part of it; but this is very different from Steiner's attitude. If, however, they regard themselves primarily as Jews, why should they reject the opportunity to take part in shaping the fulfillment of the Jewish dream? The picture of Israel as a desert with young pioneers planting young trees may mean for the young intellectual that it is not for him, that it is a waste of his abilities. To him it might be said that not always is sacrifice required; that there are challenges before him as an intellectual to take part in determining what values are to be preserved and how a real flesh and blood society can organize itself to fulfill them; to see, for example, what functions the army in the Israeli state can fulfill in building the society, as indeed it does, instead of looking at it from the intellectual skies and sighing. It is a warm, exhilarating mission, an opportunity to do something. Why should anybody want to stay there "in the cold," if that is what he really thinks the Diaspora is, sitting there forever on the fences of the world and vainly trying to save a world which can as well produce its own saviours?

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Steiner is pointing out a new tradition.
There is much in it that is in
accordance with East European cultural
tradition.