Leo Baeck Part 1: The Soft-Spoken Sage

Episode 31 of *Exile*

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JOSHUA MALINA: Crouched in a basement, Major Patrick Dolan tunes a shortwave radio. It's May 1945 and, above him, the streets of Prague are lined with bullets and blood. The Nazis have controlled the city for six years, but the Soviet army is approaching in force. The Czech resistance movement has seized the opportunity, launching their attack. Civilians are erecting barricades, assaulting enemy positions, and Hitler's remaining forces are lashing out with brutal, indiscriminate violence. Major Dolan had to cross Nazi lines to get here. He's with the American intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services, on a covert mission to help the Czech underground. Or so he thought. Finally, his radio locks on a clear channel. But the orders that come through are not what he's expecting. Major Dolan is told to travel out of the city, 40 miles north, to a prison camp to find a man named Leo Baeck.

MAJOR PATRICK DOLAN: Who the hell is Leo Baeck?

JOSHUA MALINA: "Leo Baeck" comes the answer, "is the Pope of the German Jews."

THEME MUSIC UP

JOSHUA MALINA: Welcome to Exile, a podcast from LBI, the Leo Baeck Institute New York. I'm Joshua Malina. When everything is taken away, then what? From LBI's archives, untold stories of Jewish lives in the shadow of fascism. Today, the story of a soft-spoken rabbi who led the German Jews and became an icon of fortitude and dignity in the face of persecution.

THEME MUSIC OUT

JOSHUA MALINA: Leo Baeck's journey to becoming a Rabbi seemed destined from a young age. One of eleven children, he was raised in a small German town called Lissa,

in the Prussian Province of Posen. At the age of six, Leo could discuss parts of the Talmud with his father with astonishing authority. 18 years later, in May 1897, he arrived in a small manufacturing town called Oppeln to begin his rabbinical career. Today, the town is in Poland, where its known as Opole, but at the time, it was part of Prussia in the German Empire. Just a few weeks after his arrival, the freshly ordained Rabbi was tasked with the opening of a new synagogue. Perched on a small island overlooking the Oder River, its dome was topped by a *Magen David*, the Star of David. With his father, Rabbi Samuel Baeck, looking on, the younger Baeck led the congregation in hymns, opened the Holy Ark to receive the Torah scrolls, and lit the Eternal Light. It was an auspicious moment. However, Baeck didn't make a strong first impression on his new congregation.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** He was not a dynamic orator by any means. He tended to be self-effacing. He thought it was important to present the message of Judaism rather than to present his own personality.

JOSHUA MALINA: Michael Meyer is a historian and the author of *Rabbi Leo Baeck: Living A Religious Imperative In Troubled Times*. The young rabbi was reserved and bookish. With his doctorate in philosophy, Baeck's academic mind was sometimes a challenge for congregants. His sermons lacked the rhetoric and flair that made some other rabbis popular.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** He may not have been the most dynamic. He may not have been a finished orator. But he was clearly a person whom they respected, and I think realized that he had an important future ahead of himself.

JOSHUA MALINA: Although he wasn't showy, Baeck was quickly recognized as a deep thinker and a conscientious teacher. But what use would a gentle philosopher and theologian be in the unimaginable decades to come? Despite his studious ways, when he arrived in Oppeln, Baeck wasted no time establishing himself socially. Soon, he even began courting.

MICHAEL MEYER: Shortly after Leo Baeck, as a rabbi in the town of Oppeln, became engaged to a beautiful and not typically Jewish-looking, very lovely young woman named Natalie Hamburger, they were walking, taking a kind of a stroll in the park, when a friend across the street suddenly turned away from them as if he were shocked.

JOSHUA MALINA: But why? They were dressed appropriately. Natalie was in a long, dark outfit with a hat, and Baeck wore a formal suit. She held his arm as they strolled. All quite proper for an engaged couple. Baeck made an effort to track down the friend to ask: what is wrong? Have I offended you? The reply came: “Here you are engaged to the daughter of one of the finest Jewish families in Germany, and you’re with some shikse!” The friend had mistaken Natalie for a non-Jewish mistress!

MICHAEL MEYER: Leo Baeck loved to tell this story. He told it many times in later years. It was an occasion where Baeck proved that he could be lighthearted and not always serious.

JOSHUA MALINA: Leo and Natalie were married in 1899. Their daughter Ruth was born the next year. While Baeck was establishing his family, and leading this small community in study and worship, he remained connected to his intellectual passions and to the wider Jewish community.

MICHAEL MEYER: Well, I think what is important in this early period is how Baeck was able to express his independent views. Views that were quite controversial.

JOSHUA MALINA: Early on, he took an unusual stance on the burgeoning movement of Zionism. The same year Baeck arrived in Oppeln, the Austro-Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress. He was responding to incredibly pervasive antisemitism in Europe. The movement to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine was building momentum, and attracting international attention. But the majority of German Jews, and almost all of the senior rabbis, wanted nothing to do with it.

MICHAEL MEYER: They felt increasingly at home in Germany. The community was prospering economically. They saw their future in Germany. They saw Zionism as a pessimism with regard to the future of Jewish life.

JOSHUA MALINA: The next year, Baeck travelled to Berlin for a gathering of German Rabbis. His father, also a rabbi, was there too. They were all asked to vote on a resolution to condemn the Zionist movement and brand its supporters as heretics. Baeck's father, and almost every other attendee, supported the resolution. Only three voted against it—including Leo Baeck.

MICHAEL MEYER: Though he was not himself a Zionist in any complete sense in the early days, he believed that rabbis should have the freedom to express Zionist or anti-Zionist views however their conscience directed them to do.

JOSHUA MALINA: In this small act of intellectual rebellion, Baeck revealed his faith in the value of openness and dialogue. This theme emerged again in his 1905 book, *The Essence of Judaism*. In it, Baeck made the bold claim that being Jewish was fundamentally about being ethical. That "Jewishness" meant living in constant dialogue with history and tradition while remaining open and responsive to the present.

MICHAEL MEYER: In Christianity, there are dogmas, the best known of which is of course, the Trinity. He argued that, within Judaism, there are no dogmas. There are no creeds. What differentiates the different Jewish groups was that they practiced Judaism differently. There was more Hebrew, perhaps more traditional prayers among the Orthodox than among the liberals, but that fundamentally, they shared a common belief that God was a transcendent God who made demands, moral demands, upon the Jewish people. And that Jewish history might be understood as an effort on the part of Jews either to follow God's commandments and live a moral life or to reject God's demand for morality, for a better world.

JOSHUA MALINA: Baeck was responding to a book by Christian theologian Adolf von Harnack, called *The Essence of Christianity*. It was a gutsy move to take on a respected

and better-known scholar some 20 years his senior. But Baeck was nothing if not a determined and forceful defender of his religion. In 1912, 39-year-old Baeck moved his family to Berlin, the home of Germany's largest Jewish community. He led a significant congregation at the grand *Fasanenstrasse* synagogue. His writings commanded respect across Europe, and he and his wife were raising their 12-year-old daughter, whose future was bright with possibility. But a global crisis was about to jolt Baeck out of this respectable life and lead him to a dramatic decision. German newspapers erupted in patriotic propaganda. Many young men were swept up in the frenzy of nationalistic pride. Germany's Jews were no exception. "All Germans must do their duty," proclaimed one Jewish organization, "but the German Jews must do more than their duty." When Germany declared war on August 1, 1914, 100,000 German Jews answered the call to arms. As the country mobilized, Baeck had to make a choice. He would leave his comfortable life in Berlin to serve Jewish soldiers as an army chaplain.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** The government furnished him with a horse and a buggy, and enabled him to travel around to the various camps where there might be Jewish soldiers.

JOSHUA MALINA: Christian chaplains were paid a salary by the government and could base themselves in one place, serving perhaps just one regiment. But Jewish chaplains were supported by their community, and Jewish soldiers were dispersed throughout the army, so Baeck was constantly on the move.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** So Leo Baeck found himself traveling from place to place, to speak with soldiers, to conduct services for them, to visit the hospitals. He served first on the western front and then on the eastern front.

JOSHUA MALINA: As part of his duties, he offered support and comfort to soldiers suffering from horrific injuries. In a report from the front lines, Baeck wrote about the time he spent in field hospitals and the letters he sent to families of the wounded and the dead.

LEO BAECK: These visits to the hospitals were the most important part of my work. The wounded were reminded of a bit of home and their hopes were lifted; they felt, as I often noted, elevated that a minister came to them as one came to the members of the other religions. I had to write a lot of letters on some days.

JOSHUA MALINA: Historian Michael Meyer says that Baeck's main goal was to lift soldiers' spirits.

MICHAEL MEYER: He would engage them in conversations on subjects that would take their minds away from the slaughter and the savagery that they experienced so that they were not just soldiers, but that they were human beings. Baeck was not one to be concerned with personal comfort. He felt it was an obligation, and was willing to sacrifice his own personal welfare again and again.

JOSHUA MALINA: Through it all, Baeck was an affectionate family man. In 1915, he wrote to his daughter on her 15th birthday.

LEO BAECK: I celebrate your birthday this year from far away, but still with you after one year during which you also have experienced many things. Above all, what I wish for your birthday is that you may always remain healthy and happy.

JOSHUA MALINA: And he had a gift in mind.

LEO BAECK: One I have chosen for you is a flower vase made out of a French cartridge shell.

JOSHUA MALINA: It was a vase made from spent munitions. A gift infused with the hope of peace for his daughter's future. After four years of comforting soldiers and conducting countless burials, Baeck became a committed pacifist. He was already recognised as a spiritual leader in Berlin, but his years of service as a chaplain had raised him even higher in esteem. At synagogue, Baeck's sermons became known for their careful structure, elegant but demanding. As a teacher of rabbis, he developed a reputation for exacting standards and politely devastating critique.

LEO BAECK: The language could be simpler. And the sermon would be twice as good if it were half as long.

JOSHUA MALINA: Just as Rabbi Leo Baeck was growing in authority and status, so too were currents of antisemitism. In September 1919, a low ranking army corporal named Adolf Hitler called for a government that would expel all Jews from Germany. Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, and the effort to unite became even more urgent. By autumn of that year, *The Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden,* an umbrella organization of many German Jewish groups, was born. In the face of increasingly public antisemitism and acts of violence, German Jews recognised that they were a fractured community, lacking unified representation. There was only one candidate to lead this new institution—someone who commanded respect from across the spectrum of German Jewry: Rabbi Leo Baeck.

MICHAEL MEYER: He was able to have bonafides from the widest possible spectrum of the Jewish community in Germany. The Zionists respected him, the non-Zionists respected him, more traditional Jews respected him, and less traditional Jews did. He projected an image of someone whom you could trust, who was not a party politician, but someone who had the interest of the Jewish community as a whole at heart, what we call in Hebrew '*klal Israel*': the totality of the Jewish people.

JOSHUA MALINA: When the vote came, it was unanimous. And so, the soft-spoken rabbi with a doctorate in philosophy was now the leading representative of the Jews in the face of a government bent on their oppression, expulsion, and worse. One question remained. Was Baeck up to the task? In September 1935, the Nazis passed the Nuremberg Laws, codifying their antisemitism into official policy. Jews were no longer citizens, and they could no longer marry non-Jews. At the time, Baeck was preparing for Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. He wrote a prayer that was sent to 800 synagogues around the country.

DANIEL LICHMAN: This is a passage that many, many British Jews will have heard every year read on Yom Kippur in reform synagogues.

JOSHUA MALINA: This is Rabbi Daniel Lichman who, along with Rabbi Colin Eimer, trained at the Leo Baeck College in London. They have both recited this prayer in many Yom Kippur services over the decades.

> **DANIEL LICHMAN: "**We stand before God strengthened by his commandment. We bow to him alone. And therefore stand upright before our fellow men. We worship him alone and remain firm in all our troubles…"

> **COLIN EIMER:** "...Humbly we trust in him and he shows us the path that lies before us. We see our future." So it's really sort of, you know, Leo Baeck would never have done this, but it's raising two fingers to the Nazis and Hitler and everything that the Nazis stood for. "We bow to him alone." And therefore stand upright before our fellow human beings, so it's really very much that act of defiance.

JOSHUA MALINA: Just as he did in the field hospitals during World War I, Baeck wanted to lift his community's spirits in the face of a threatening reality. But before Baeck's defiant prayer could be read publicly, the Gestapo got wind of it. They understood its subversive message. They threatened him, and he was forced to send out a telegram.

> **LEO BAECK:** By Order of the Office of the Secret State Police, I call upon you, under no circumstances and at no time and place to read the proclamation. Destroy it.

JOSHUA MALINA: Baeck was arrested and briefly imprisoned. He was released just 24 hours later, perhaps, because at the time, the Nazi government was still sensitive to foreign opinion, and the arrest was covered in the London *Times*. This was an increasingly bleak period for Baeck. Natalie, his wife of 38 years, died of a stroke in March 1937. At her funeral, Baeck said, "God give us the strength to go through the days without you". And on Natalie's gravestone he inscribed, "but you surpassed them all." Everything was changing. In the face of the intensifying Nazi threat, the *Reichsvertretung*, the organization which hoped to represent and support the German

Jews, turned to a new and bitter task: facilitating mass emigration. In January 1938, Baeck released a statement.

> **LEO BAECK:** The *Reichsvertretung* finds it necessary to warn against exaggerated expectations. The possibilities of emigration depend on the readiness of other lands to hold open their gates for the Jews from Germany as well as eastern Europe.

JOSHUA MALINA: For the most part, those gates remained closed. Those who made the painful decision to emigrate submitted to a bureaucratic gauntlet of quota lotteries, lines at foreign consulates, and daunting paperwork in hopes of getting one of the few spots. In January 1939, Baeck's young granddaughter was sent to England on the Kindertransport. His daughter, Ruth, and her husband quickly followed. A few months later, Baeck was able to visit Ruth in England while working to secure more places for emigrating Jews. Many urged him not to return to Germany. A British university was prepared to offer him a job and allow him to immigrate. Baeck declined and returned home, but offers kept coming his way. An Englishman named Michael Bruce, who was helping a few Jewish friends to escape, sent a message to Leo Baeck: would he accept his assistance to flee? Baeck replied:

> **LEO BAECK:** I will go, when I am the last Jew alive in Germany.

JOSHUA MALINA: The situation was becoming bleaker. The *Reichsvertetung* was about to be dissolved, and replaced.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** Well, the most arduous, difficult, heartbreaking decisions came not in the period of the *Reichsvertretung*, but in the period that began with the November pogrom, the so-called Kristallnacht, in November of 1938 when the *Reichsvertretung* gave way to the *Reichsvereinigung*, an organization directly under Nazi control, which gave the Jewish leadership far less maneuverability than they had had earlier.

JOSHUA MALINA: The national organization representing the Jews was tightly monitored by the Nazi government, but it had been technically independent. Now, it was

officially absorbed, an organ of Nazi policy. Every decision, every communication required official oversight. And they were soon faced with another dreadful dilemma.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** The issue that came up that was most devastating was to what extent should the Jewish community play any role in the deportation of its members, which began in the fall of 1941.

JOSHUA MALINA: In October of that year, Jewish emigration was officially forbidden. Escape was no longer an option. Nazi policy was shifting to systematic deportation. Those still left in the cities and towns did not yet know the extent of what the Nazis were building. But they did know the concentration camps were places of detention, suffering, and death. It would seem unconscionable, then, that the organization led by Leo Baeck would ever cooperate with the Nazi authorities to send Jews there. But in a sense, they did.

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** And here Baeck made a controversial decision. The deportation lists that were made by the Nazi officials. Leo Baeck decided that he would send members of the *Reichsvereinigung* staff and also rabbinical students from the Jewish seminary to participate in the task of bringing these people whose numbers had come up from their homes to the collection center.

JOSHUA MALINA: When deportations began, Baeck had receded somewhat from the leadership of the organization. But many years later, he defended the decision.

> **LEO BAECK:** When the question arose whether Jewish orderlies should help pick up Jews for deportation, I took the position that it would be better for them to do it, because they could at least be more gentle and helpful than the Gestapo and make the ordeal easier. It was scarcely in our power to oppose the order effectively.

JOSHUA MALINA: So, as you answered the door fearing Gestapo, or an antisemitic mob, you would instead be greeted by a sympathetic face, bearing the most terrifying news: pack your bag, you are being sent to a prison camp.

MICHAEL MEYER: They would do it in a more merciful way. There was no way of voiding these decisions. It was simply a matter of how they would be carried out. And therefore, Baeck made the decision—not to collaborate, for collaboration means agreeing with the principles of the group you're collaborating with—but rather, cooperating simply to make the inevitable not quite as painful as it would've been.

JOSHUA MALINA: Eventually, it was Baeck's turn to go himself. On January 27th, 1943, Berlin was dark and quiet. In his modest apartment, Rabbi Leo Baeck sat in the pre-dawn darkness, working at his desk.

LEO BAECK: I was fully dressed when the bell rang at a quarter of six. Only the Gestapo would come at that hour. My housekeeper let in two men in civilian clothes. One of them addressed me: 'We have orders to take you to Theresienstadt'.

JOSHUA MALINA: He didn't resist. He had been expecting this for a long time. They demanded he come with them at once, but Baeck responded in a way only he could.

LEO BAECK: You are two and can use force to take me. But if you will wait an hour I will go with you as you wish.

JOSHUA MALINA: One left to make a telephone call. When he returned, he said: "We will wait." Leo Baeck sat down and wrote a farewell letter to his family. Then he did something surprising. He took up his pen and wrote postal orders to pay his gas and electricity bills. The banal domesticity of the gesture was staggering. A condemned man insistent on settling his utilities.

MICHAEL MEYER: What does that indicate about the person that, at the point of being deported to a ghetto, which in many ways was like a concentration camp, he would pay his bill? And that has been decried as the worst kind of bourgeois behavior.

JOSHUA MALINA: Was this the pathetic clinging on of a civilized man to the rituals of a world that no longer existed? Or was it something else entirely? The quiet insistence that, even in the face of systematic dehumanization, the obligations of decent society would be honored?

> **MICHAEL MEYER:** It was thumbing his finger or whatever at those who were picking him up and saying: you think I'm less than a human being, but I'm not! Even under these circumstances, I will do what you believe that I can't do. Namely, to act the role of a responsible person. It is typical of Baeck's being, if you like, a law-and-order person to the end.

JOSHUA MALINA: People tumbled from the overcrowded cars. Elderly men clutching cases, women in old fur coats, children blinking in the harsh daylight. These were the “privileged” Jews: decorated veterans of the Great War, prominent artists, intellectuals who once graced Berlin's salons. And now, Rabbi Leo Baeck was among them. Just a few months before his 70th birthday. They called Theresienstadt a model ghetto. It was meant to be a showcase of Nazi benevolence, a refuge for the oldest and the highest ranking of the Jews. An old military garrison designed for around 3,000 people now held almost 60,000. When Baeck wrote about the experience of arriving at Theresienstadt, he did so, characteristically, in the third person.

> **LEO BAECK:** When he had entered the fortress gates between the walls and bastions, a gate of destiny was closed behind him, perhaps forever. He was locked in. Covering the streets there was, when the sun shone, the thick dust that the high ramparts did not keep out. And when the rain or snow had fallen, there was the deep sticky mud that seemed to grow daily. And from everywhere and into everything came the vermin—crawling, jumping, flying—in their onslaught against the hungry human beings. For months and months, maybe for years and years, this was now to be the world.

JOSHUA MALINA: It was filthy, uncomfortable and frightening. But, for Baeck, the hardest part of the whole ordeal was keeping hold of who he was.

LEO BAECK: Here the mass submerged the individual. He was enclosed in the mass, just as he was encircled by the dust and the dirt, by the teeming myriads of the insects and encircled, as it were, also by the need and distress, always together, the hunger that seemed never to end. Much, perhaps everything, depended on whether one stood this test, that the individual in one remained alive as an individual and continued to recognize the individual in the other.

What would the future hold for him if he could not maintain his mind?

THEME MUSIC UP

JOSHUA MALINA: Rabbi Leo Baeck's story will continue with Part 2, coming next week. The Leo Baeck Collection in the LBI Archives includes over four linear feet of vital documents, correspondence, manuscripts, and photographs from Baeck's estate and that of his granddaughter, Marianne Dreyfus. He also appears as a correspondent in the archival collections of countless others, ranging from Albert Einstein to his congregants, students, and colleagues. Learn more at lbi.org/exile. Exile is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. I'm your narrator, Joshua Malina. This episode was written by Ilan Goodman. Our executive producers are Laura Regehr and Stuart Coxe. Our producer is Emily Morantz. Research and translation by Isabella Kempf. Voice acting by Patrick Garrow. Sound design and audio mix by Gaëtan Harris, with additional mixing by Philip Wilson. Theme music by Oliver Wickham. This episode of Exile is made possible in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Finance and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.