

Leo Baeck, Part 2: The Teacher of Theresienstadt

Episode 32 of *Exile*

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**JOSHUA MALINA:** This is Part 2 of the story of Rabbi Leo Baeck. If you missed last week's episode, please go back and listen before continuing. In a cramped attic above the barracks, residents of Theresienstadt gather in the dark evenings. Word spreads during work detail, and when evening comes, they climb the treacherous stairs: professors, former bankers, seamstresses, teachers. They don't want to miss it. The man who once commanded respect in Berlin's grandest synagogues stands before them on rough wooden planks, speaking from memory about philosophy, medieval Jewish history, and obscure points of theology. The poet Else Dormitzer is among them.

**ELSE DORMITZER:** In a cold, dark loft, a collection of people sit or stand on beams; before them, on a wooden stand, the speaker appears as a prophet-like figure from an older time. Whether he speaks about Plato, Kant, Maimonides, or is speaking about 'Return and Reconciliation,' 'Soul and Body,' his audience is seen listening, absorbed, in breathless silence, forgetting hunger and cold, going away with new strength — to suffer the torments of the camp.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Another inmate, Trude Simonsohn, was transported to another time and place.

**TRUDE SIMONSOHN:** For me, those two hours were as if I were in a university and not in a camp. You submerged yourself so much in the spiritual that you forgot you were freezing, that you were hungry and standing in an ice-cold attic.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Not all prisoners attend these lectures. But for those who do, and for Rabbi Leo Baeck himself, they provide enrichment in the face of deprivation.

*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, we continue the story of the soft-spoken Rabbi who led the German Jews with fortitude and dignity in the face of persecution.

*THEME MUSIC OUT*

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Those precious hours, when Baeck was able to transport his audience beyond the confines of the ghetto, soon gave way to grinding reality. One ongoing threat seeded uncertainty and dread: the possibility of being “sent east”. The transports had begun in 1942, over a year before Baeck arrived in the camp. No one there knew precisely where they went, nor what happened when you arrived. The Nazis disguised their intent. On September 23rd, 1944, the SS issued an order to the inmates of Theresienstadt.

**NAZI OFFICIAL:** It is imperative that Theresienstadt should provide more manpower than hitherto for the war effort. Hence it has been decided that 2,500 able-bodied men will leave Theresienstadt for this purpose on the morning of Tuesday, the 26th of September. They will set up a new labor camp. Those proceeding to the new destination will take only light luggage, one change of linen, and food for twenty-four hours.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** No one knew what to believe. Was this really an assignment to a work camp? Baeck wasn't so sure.

**LEO BAECK:** Transports to the East went out, in some months day by day, no one knew quite where to; one only knew eastward into new uncertainty. A cloud of questions, of anxiety and of terror ever anew descended on the camp. It seemed to be the secret watchword of the overlords: Never let the Jews come to rest! Those for whom the lot had been cast were rounded up in one of the barracks, and they were given a new transport number. An existence had ended for them; what would be the other existence? In front of the barracks there stood between two files of the SS, the train of cattle trucks. Human beings were

penned up in them and the train drove out of the camp, away from those who yet remained.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** The inmates may not have known for certain where they were going, and what would happen. They were being sent to places like Treblinka and Auschwitz. Death camps. Between October 1942 and October 1944, the Germans deported 46,750 Jews from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. In the ghetto, rumors and uncertainty swirled. But as early as 1943, a few souls were able to escape Auschwitz and share news of their experiences back to Theresienstadt. Baeck was one of the few who learned the truth. In an essay written years later, Baeck recalled a man who sought him out and asked to speak with him alone.

**LEO BAECK:** He ended up in the huge camp of Auschwitz. Like everyone there, he went through a process of selection and was assigned to do slave labor. The others were led away and gassed to death. He knows that definitely; everyone at Auschwitz knows it.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** There was now a bitter choice before him: what should he do with that information? Should he share it? Bury it? Or act on it somehow? In the end, he decided it was better to keep it to himself.

**LEO BAECK:** No one should know. If the Council of Elders were informed, the whole camp would know within a few hours. Living in the expectation of death by gassing would only be harder.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** This decision has had its critics—even to this day. But in Theresienstadt, death was already part of the everyday experience. Baeck was repeatedly called to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, the funeral prayer, for those who had passed. For this elder Rabbi, whose goal had always been to elevate the spirits of his community, what other choice was there? Here's Baeck's biographer Michael Meyer.

**MICHAEL MEYER:** His motivation was, if I tell them they will fall into yet greater despair, nothing will be gained by it. Moreover, if they do place a hope that they will survive to raise within their hearts, then there is the possibility that they will

survive. When I have been asked about it, I have often used in reply a saying from the Talmud: “do not judge your neighbor unless you have been in your neighbor's place”. It's easy to make decisions as to what was right or wrong in a situation that you haven't been in.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Despite the uncertainty, everyone knew the transports east were to be feared and avoided at all costs. Baeck was appointed to the Jewish Council of Elders, which was created by the Nazis to help manage the camp. They still answered to their captors, but were left to organize things like food distribution and accommodation. But they also had a say in who got deported. Some influential individuals were able to secure exemptions for friends and relatives.—One day, the names of Baeck's own niece and nephew appeared on the deportation list. They were scheduled to be on the next transport. His own family. Already, he had lost four sisters to disease. And besides, the niece and nephew were doctors—surely, their skills were essential to life in the ghetto? How much more death could one man handle? Baeck could have intervened. But he didn't. That would have betrayed what he saw as the foundational responsibility of his religion.

**MICHAEL MEYER:** Leo Baeck's God was a God who made demands on human beings to live a just and merciful life. His conception of God was above all a God who demanded justice. What one's connection to God was, was through the sense of mitzvah, of moral obligation, of moral commandment.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** In this dreadful circumstance, Baeck's devotion to God meant he did not intervene.

**MICHAEL MEYER:** He was one who believed very strongly that it was wrong to play favorites, even under very serious circumstances like those. Because if one name was removed, another name was substituted for it. So you weren't saving a life. You were in fact just substituting one life for another. And you didn't have the right to do that.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** As the war continued, information could no longer travel. None of Baeck's family knew if he was still alive. The possibility seemed remote. But then, in February 1945, Baeck's daughter Ruth, who was living in England, received a letter from Switzerland. Nazi officials had released a group of 1200 people from Theresienstadt in an attempt to show goodwill to the encroaching Allied forces. One of them had been instructed to write to Ruth and share news. Her father was in good health and his mind was strong. As usual, he was using his strength to support those around him. Leo Baeck was still alive. And astonishingly, he had been offered the opportunity to leave on a train bound for Switzerland. But, according to the letter, he had declined. He chose instead to stay and serve the inmates. Ruth was glad to know her father was still alive—and acting like himself. But back in Theresienstadt, Baeck was still in great peril.

**LEO BAECK:** The door opened and an SS officer entered. It was Eichmann. He was visibly taken aback at seeing me. 'Herr Baeck, are you still alive?' He looked me over carefully, as if he did not trust his eyes, and added coldly, 'I thought you were dead.' 'Herr Eichmann,' I replied, 'you are apparently announcing a future occurrence.' 'I understand now,' he said. 'A man who is claimed dead lives longer.'

**JOSHUA MALINA:** As it turned out, there was a Moravian rabbi also called Beck, though with a slightly different spelling, who had died in the camp a couple of years earlier, fairly soon after Leo Baeck had first arrived there. Eichmann and his cronies had confused the two Rabbi Becks. So Rabbi Leo Baeck of Berlin had been listed as dead. But now, Eichmann knew he was alive.

**LEO BAECK:** Feeling certain that I had little time left to live, I wasted none with him. I walked to the door, he stepped aside, and I went to my quarters. I gave my wife's and my wedding rings to a friend and asked him to hand them on to my daughter in England. Then I wrote farewell letters and was ready for what might come.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Baeck's fate seemed certain. But in the end, Eichmann seems to have done nothing. And by spring 1945, Germany's army was in retreat. On the western front, allied forces had made it across the River Rhine at multiple points. And from the east, The Red Army, with millions of soldiers and powerful tanks, was also moving forward. They now controlled most of Poland, East Prussia, and parts of eastern Germany. They were closing in on Czechoslovakia. In Theresienstadt, the sound of Soviet guns was growing louder. The Nazis started flooding the ghetto with desperately sick internees from other camps.

**LEO BAECK:** From everywhere, those ill from spotted fever were brought to Theresienstadt in open freight cars. From one train we carried away more than one hundred people who had died on the way. It was like a lottery to see who would be infected, but the plan was clear: to 'liquidate' the camp.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Just a few weeks later, in early May 1945, a small blue and yellow plane arrived at the ghetto carrying Red Cross officials. And a few days after that, the war in Europe was over. The Nazis had been defeated. But there were still tens of thousands in the ghetto who needed care. Baeck and three other prominent Jews issued a directive. Letters could now be sent and received without censorship. Newspapers were brought in and shared. Inmates were allowed to gather. The biggest threat now was disease.

**LEO BAECK:** Seriously ill persons still are present here, meaning that a strong observation of the quarantine rules is necessary. For that reason, observe them carefully.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** As Baeck struggled to control the outbreak, US Major Patrick Dolan arrived at the camp.

**PATRICK DOLAN:** Who the hell is Leo Baeck?

**CAPTAIN:** Leo Baeck is the Pope of the German Jews.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** By this point, Baeck was very thin. But his hair and beard were neatly trimmed, and he was busy. People were desperate to get out. But moving thousands of sick, hungry people without medical support would have only caused the further spread of disease and more death. Major Dolan asked Baeck to come with him. Baeck refused. He needed another month to see his responsibilities through to the end. With the help of the International Red Cross and the Russian army, Theresienstadt was carefully emptied within a few months. And on July 1, 1945, after two years of confinement, Rabbi Leo Baeck finally left the ghetto. Major Dolan collected him in an army jeep. At an airport near Prague, they boarded an American military plane headed to Paris. As they flew over Baeck's battle-scarred homeland toward the French border, the Major looked out the window...

**PATRICK DOLAN:** That's the Rhine down there, you'll never have to see that again.

**LEO BAECK:** Patrick, do not have revenge in your heart. Only love and justice.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** German Jewry was now scattered. A small number of Jews remained in Germany, but as Baeck declared in a 1945 interview, the "nourishing foundation" was gone.

**LEO BAECK:** The history of the Jews in Germany is definitely finished.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** In the years that followed, Baeck would return to Germany several times, both to support reconciliation efforts, and to help rebuild the small German-Jewish community that still remained. But for the most part, he lived the rest of his life in London. In fact, a large proportion of surviving European Jews put down their roots in Britain or America after the war. But for others, the safety of a fully Jewish homeland was the only answer. And the question of Zionism was one that had long occupied Baeck. At the beginning of his Rabbinical career, he had taken what was considered an unusual and provocative position. While the German Rabbis wanted to condemn Zionism as heresy, he had voted to allow free discussion. He was not quite a

Zionist, but he felt there was a place for open debate and serious consideration.-But, after European Jewry had been decimated by the Holocaust, many felt the idea was more necessary and justified than ever. And yet, Baeck watched with concern as the situation in Palestine evolved. In 1948, he co-authored a New York Times op-ed with Albert Einstein. They were both sympathetic to the basic aim of Zionism: to create a new homeland for the Jewish people. But Baeck and Einstein condemned cruelty in pursuing that goal

**LEO BAECK:** We declare emphatically that we do not not condone methods of terrorism and of fanatical nationalism any more if practiced by Jews than if practiced by Arabs.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** The first Arab-Israeli war in 1948 displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs. Baeck and a small group of British Jews set up a charity, the Jewish Society for Human Service, and formed the Committee for Relief in The Middle East. Their aim was to provide support to both Arabs and Jews in the newly claimed state of Israel, as well as Arab refugees beyond its official borders. In a speech to its members, Baeck extended the universalist idea of Judaism.

**LEO BAECK:** This is the Jewish rule: we cannot stand by the Kingdom of God without standing for human need. Helping distressed people, we help our soul as well as all mankind.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** After the war, Baeck's work turned to the question of legacy. Many German-Jewish scholars had perished, but others had escaped or survived in exile. They feared for the towering intellectual tradition that they had developed: what would become of it?

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** So actually, as early as the 1940s, German-Jewish scholars began planning institutions for historical research and preservation in countries of exile, in the UK and the US.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** This is Dr. Ruth Nattermann, a historian at the University of Leipzig in eastern Germany.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** They saw the destruction of the *wissenschaft des judentums* and the mass flight of Jewish academics from Nazi Germany as a profound crisis.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** The *wissenschaft des judentums* was the uniquely German discipline of historical criticism.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** They were so proud of this *wissenschaft des judentums* and for them it was the, the really, the embodiment of German-Jewish scholarship. So *wissenschaft* is really translated as “science”, but you could also say “scholarship” of Judaism. And basically the German Jews were the first ones who analyzed sources in a scientific way, critically questioning these sources. So it's the critical use of historical sources, and you are not just taking them for granted, but you have to interpret them.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Leo Baeck was one of the best known practitioners of this intellectual tradition. And now, he became its figurehead.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** From 1945 onwards, efforts to document the history of German Jews took on a twofold purpose. Firstly, to advance scholarship. And secondly, to serve as an enduring act of commemoration.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** The scholars in exile, now living in the UK, the US, and Israel, wanted to use reparations payments to set up a new institution to continue their work. But whom should it represent? And what should be its aim? A long list of scholars were involved in the discussions, notable among them Martin Buber, the Austrian philosopher, and Gershom Scholem, the kabbalah scholar and historian. The discussions were prolonged and impassioned. Any new institution would have to bring together scholars from different ideological backgrounds. One divide was between the Zionists and the liberals. The liberals believed that their Jewish religion could be combined with their national identity as citizens of any nation.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** They thought that by just defining Judaism as a religion, and not as an ethnic character, integration would've been easier for them, but they were betrayed. So many of them, they really had big problems admitting this kind of mistake after the second World War.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** The Zionists, by contrast, argued that full integration would never be possible. History seemed to provide dreadful proof. Leo Baeck would have been at the meeting himself, but at age 82, he was in poor health.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** So many of the founders of this institute saw him as a symbol of the best that had been called on to preserve as a spiritual heritage, and they decided to choose his name for this institute that would appear symbolic to the largest possible number of Jews who had emigrated from Germany.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** So in 1955, the Leo Baeck Institute was founded with independent branches in Jerusalem, London, and New York. It was dedicated to the study of the history and culture of German-speaking Jewry, aiming to preserve its vibrant cultural heritage.

**RUTH NATTERMAN:** The founders of the Leo Baeck Institute once feared that their own passing would mark the end of remembrance for German-speaking Jewry. And yet, over seven decades the Institute's wealth of publications, projects, and collaborations has demonstrated the enduring vitality of German-Jewish history. And today, the LBI's historiography has evolved to embrace transnational, European, and global connections. So what began as a memorial community of exiled German-Jewish scholars has transformed into a dynamic global intellectual network through historical research, preservation, and renewal.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** One of those projects is this podcast series: Exile, bringing to life the stories of those who fled fascism, and the stories of people who suffered under it, like Leo Baeck. Today, Baeck's legacy includes many institutions which bear his name, as well as a thriving family line.

**JAMES DREYFUS:** So Leo Baeck and Natalie Baeck had one daughter by the name of Ruth Berlack. Ruth married Herman Berlack. They had one daughter, one child, Marianne, who was my mother.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** This is his great grandson, James Dreyfus.

**JAMES DREYFUS:** What I'm told is that he loved going on walks with me. I was his only great grandchild. And that he loved surreptitiously giving me sugar cubes when I visited my grandmother's house. She lived in Camden, you know, near Golders Green.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Leo Baeck had been a teacher at the Hochschule in Berlin when the first ever female Rabbi, Regina Jonas, was ordained 1935. Decades later, James's wife, Ellen, continued the family's long rabbinical tradition, when she was ordained as part of a new wave of female rabbis in 1979. James's mother, Marianne Dreyfus, spent a lot of time with her grandfather in his final years. After his death, she was often asked to share her memories.

**JAMES DREYFUS:** Over the course of many years, my mother, Marianne Dreyfus, gave many talks on Leo Baeck. These were very personal for her as she had spent a good deal of time with him in Cincinnati and in London.

**JOSHUA MALINA:** At 8 years old, she had been with him in Berlin in 1933, when Hitler came to power. And she was also there in his final years, supporting him and listening to his lectures in the United States. Decades later, Marianne would finish her talks with these words, spoken here by her son, James:

**JAMES DREYFUS:** "Why are you interested in Leo Baeck? Why have you asked me to come here to speak of him? The answer is simple. We are cynical. Perhaps we have good reason to be cynical. We have become disillusioned with

our fellow human beings. But here was a saint. He was as honest as ever a human being can be. He sacrificed himself for his fellow being. He suffered torture without yielding to hatred. He represents the invincible spirit of Judaism. He derived his strength and his courage from his faith and from his God. When we are tempted to question the worth of Judaism and faith and the power of God for those who believe, then let us remember Leo Baeck.”

**JOSHUA MALINA:** Let us remember Leo Baeck, the rabbi who preached love and justice and lived those values to the end.

*THEME MUSIC UP*

**JOSHUA MALINA:** 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](http://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, Adi Braun, Gordon Hecht, and Athena Karkanis. 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.