

ERICH KÄHLER

A direct contrast with Petersson is provided by another young Hamburg mathematician who made a name for himself, and who "habilitated" the year after Petersson: Erich Kähler. Kähler's extreme nationalism and defense of events of the 1930s and 1940s was so pronounced, even in 1988, that, setting out to interview him, I was warned that he had been a Nazi party member. In fact, he seems not to have been. Not only did he insist on this fact, but there seems to be no BDC file indicating he was.²⁰⁷ One of the reasons for interest in Kähler is that he personally knew at different times, briefly or at length, a number of the people appearing in these pages—the view of a mathematician still unashamedly (but somewhat mystically) on the far right in 1988 provides, therefore, a different and perhaps valuable perspective. But he is also extremely interesting in himself as a type not yet examined. He seemed to be a man self-educated to Nietzschean ideas of leadership who thought and acted as he did out of the deep values of loyalty and service: "Theirs not to question why. Theirs but to do or die." He seemed to display none of the ulterior motives, good or bad, that color many of the people in these pages. Neither did he seem to have had any developed system of values, interests, and experience by which to judge (when Hitler came to power he had just turned twenty-seven—his most important mathematical papers appeared in the next two years). It is hard not to respect Kähler as principled while abhorring his principles. In 1935, Kähler went to Königsberg, where he became Ordinarius the following year.²⁰⁸ Thus far information provided by Kähler is as for his listing in the membership of the German Mathematical Society. However, in 1935 also, he told me, he volunteered for military service;²⁰⁹ he was in the navy in 1937, and on August 24, 1939, in the army. He spent the whole of World War II in the German military and 1945–47 as a prisoner of war. Thus, what arguably might have been his most productive mathematical years were spent in military service. In 1948, when he was over forty-two, he again became an Ordinarius, this time in the city of his birth and early student days, Leipzig, then in East Germany. In 1964 he returned to Hamburg, where he had obtained his doctorate under Blaschke, and later he retired to a Hamburg suburb.

Politically, Kähler said that he was inclined toward German nationalism (like many of his colleagues), and Hitler awakened in him the feeling of a greater Germany (which he apparently responded to by desiring military service, rather than by joining the party). The *Führerprinzip* was, he felt, not bad in itself: for

²⁰⁷ Erich Kähler, interview, Jan. 30, 1988. All information about Kähler below and not otherwise cited is from this interview.

²⁰⁸ There seems to be an error in Scharlau et al. 1990: 198. Kähler succeeded Gabor Szegő (forced out as Jewish) in 1935 in Königsberg.

²⁰⁹ In January 1935, the scheduled plebiscite in the Saar resulted in its rejoining Germany. In March 1935, Hitler openly began to rearm in repudiation of the Versailles Treaty.

to be *Führer* meant to be responsible.²¹⁰ His oath to Hitler (as a civil servant) was very important to him: he thought of Hitler as his Kaiser. There was a "cult of genius" around Hitler; hence, in Kähler's view, there are no neo-Nazis because one can't be a Nazi without Hitler, whose real aim was the nullification of the Versailles Treaty. He thought Hitler's high politics could not be widely understood, as they were supranational, like Roman politics. No one had dug so deeply into history as Hitler.²¹¹ No doubt there were criminals in high places in Hitler's Germany, but the leadership of the country was not criminal. Similarly, Kähler thought the blaming of the whole German people, a *Kulturvolk* (cultural nation), for the criminal acts of some was not only inappropriate, but resulted from an intentional desire to make Germany politically impotent.

As to the "Jewish question," Hitler, thought Kähler, had the insight to see that there was a "Jewish question."²¹² How Hitler handled the Jewish question may have been wrong—and Kähler thought *Kristallnacht* was wrong—but this did not negate Hitler's insight. Having said this, he immediately attempted to mitigate the wrong by commenting that much worse things were happening in Lebanon [in 1988]. Indeed, there were only two things that made Kähler doubt Hitler's politics: his handling of the Jewish question, and his marching into Prague in March 1939 (because it meant he had lied when he said the Czech Sudetenland was all he wanted—Kähler acknowledged the Bible as a strong early influence in his life). However, he made the point, a familiar one from the German right, that none of the extermination camps was on German soil, but all were in the East, as if to argue that the German people would not have tolerated them. Furthermore, he pointed out that Auschwitz was liberated by Russians; news of Auschwitz came from Russians and was intended to defame the Germans. For Kähler, the destruction of the Jews (which he seemed to admit was wrong) is used internationally as a "wooden hammer" (*Holzhammer*) to end any serious analysis or discussion of the German question (this, of course, was said in 1988, prior to the reunification of Germany).

As to World War II, Kähler thought it mostly had to do with three peoples (*Völker*): Jews, Russians, and Germans, all of which had the "insightful intellectual spirit" (*zuschauenden Geist*). The other peoples in the war were completely secondary. When the conversation shortly thereafter shifted to his admiration of Dostoyevski as a "Russian Nietzsche," and I mentioned that Moeller van den Bruck²¹³ had translated Dostoyevsky into German, Kähler recalled that Gregor Strasser had led a wing of the NSDAP that had wanted to stay open to the Russians (i.e., truly socialist), and then added, somewhat surprisingly "I believe he was later killed." Since Gregor Strasser was one of the victims on June 30, 1934, "The Night of the Long Knives" or *Röhmputsch*, this may reflect either a

²¹⁰ This is, of course, a reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

²¹¹ Alan Bullock, in the conclusion of his well-known biography *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny* (1962; original publication 1952), remarks that Hitler made the modern world.

²¹² So did some conservative opponents of Hitler, like Carl Goerdeler; cf. above, chapter 3.

²¹³ Moeller van den Bruck originated the term "Third Reich." For more about him, see Stern 1961.

selective loss of memory or the fact that many of the victims were not widely known at the time.

It would seem as though the same sort of nationalism that motivated Erich Kähler in 1935 continued to motivate him over fifty years later. A former student told me that when Kähler was active as a professor in Hamburg, he used to keep a Nazi naval flag in his office. Kähler's thinking the Jews were an important people of genius like the Germans because they created a nation *de novo* seems rather like the disturbing fact that much of Adolf Eichmann's knowledge of Jews was garnered from reading Theodor Herzl's *Judenstaat*, with which Eichmann was positively impressed.²¹⁴

What did this man who thought that it was nonsense to speak of twelve years of injustice think of his mathematical colleagues during those twelve years? All professors, he said, had to be inclined a bit toward the Nazi party (*NS-parteilich*) in order to remain in office. Like himself, Blaschke believed in a Greater Germany and was the "protective angel" of the Hamburg department. Hecke was "not political enough," but Blaschke said to leave Hecke alone and he would care for him. Blaschke was sophisticated, Hecke just the opposite (*weltfremd*); but Blaschke protected Hecke and Artin (until his emigration in 1937). As to "Deutsche Mathematik," as an idea in itself it had nothing against it. However, Bieberbach's mistake was to mix philosophy and mathematics—one could be interested in both (as Kähler was), but they should not be mixed. Teichmüller was not naive, and neither was the philosopher Martin Heidegger; in Kähler's view, they wanted and believed in a Greater Germany. The tragedy, in the Greek sense of the word, was that one had to do something immoral because one was compelled (presumably in aiming toward a greater good as an end).

Spending time on Kähler's right-wing philosophical-political perspective may seem irrelevant to mathematics, but in a rather interesting way this is not so. For some time he had been interested in philosophically mathematizing, as it were, the world and human existence. His philosophical hero beside Nietzsche was Leibniz. Thus, in a paper published in 1986 (when he was eighty), Kähler spoke (in English) of a "mathematical monadology offered by a philosophic transposition of the local algebra, about which I have reported elsewhere," and stated that "dynamics of monads find their best representation in arithmetic and purely algebraic relations." The point is not what meaning such phrases may have nor their relevance to the attendant mathematics, but the effort at a "philosophical mobilization of mathematics."²¹⁵ Kähler believed that mathematics is called to develop Nietzsche's thought in the same way as Maxwell was called to develop Faraday's.²¹⁶ In our 1988 discussion, Kähler remarked that we do not

²¹⁴ Arendt 1994: 40–41, 57, 209. For parallels between Imperial German nationalism and Jewish nationalism, see Mosse 1970.

²¹⁵ Erich Kähler, "The Poincaré Group," in J.S.R. Chisholm and A. K. Common, eds., *Clifford Algebras and Their Applications in Mathematical Physics* (1986), 265–272. Somewhat curiously, given the present interest in "string theory" in ten dimensions, this paper, which is about the mathematics of cosmology and relativity, *inter alia* discusses a purportedly relevant ten-dimensional Lie group.

²¹⁶ Nietzsche was by training and occupation a classical philologist. Faraday, essentially self-edu-

live in states founded on law and justice (*Rechtstaat*) because an appropriate analysis of history is not possible, but also that his "people" (*Volk*) was now humanity, and the global separations in the world are the real problem (in 1988, Kähler was referring to the Cold War). There will never be a world peace if one does not think globally and create a world-nation. Treaties will never bring world peace. What is the core? According to Kähler, it is Germanic thought (*Deutsches Denken*) or, equivalently, Roman thought, which would see the world as potentially a single *imperium*. Mathematical analysis is the philosophical route to that "Brave New World." As a reviewer of a recent paper by Kähler (published when he was eighty-six) remarked: "The main thesis of the paper is that algebraic geometry is a prolegomenon to a mathematical theory of monads."²¹⁷

To assure the reader of Kähler's solid mathematical credentials (at least fifty years ago), it should be noted that in 1944, when he was effectively a prisoner at St. Nazaire (a fortress at the mouth of the Loire), he claimed that no less notable French mathematicians than Elie Cartan and André Weil sent him mathematics books.

Erich Kähler and his mathematical philosophy are certainly *sui generis*. His blending of expertise in sophisticated mathematics, German idealist philosophy, extreme nationalism, Leibniz, and Nietzsche provides a strange mixture. He is certainly an outlier among the mathematicians of this period. He died in 2001.

WILHELM SÜSS

Far from an outlier, perhaps the central mathematical figure during the Third Reich, certainly the political spokesman for mathematics from 1937 to 1945, was Wilhelm Süss. Corresponding to this critical role are the several times he has already appeared earlier in these pages. An attempt at further understanding his attitudes, however, seems crucial to understanding the German mathematical community during this critical period. The fact that both the German Mathematical Society and the faculty at Freiburg chose him as their leader during those years reflects the values they saw in him. It was the way in which Süss acquired the trust of the mathematicians and brought them through this crucial time that made Alexander Ostrowski say in a memorial address:²¹⁸ "Certainly no

cated, knew no mathematics, but invented the concept of a force field, later exploited mathematically by Maxwell.

²¹⁷ Doru Stefanescu, reviewing Kähler's paper "Also sprach Ariadne," in *Mathematical Reviews* 956 (1995): 6.

²¹⁸ Alexander Ostrowski, "Wilhelm Süss, 1895–1958," *Freiburger Universitätsreden, Neue Folge* no. 28 (1958): 12. I am indebted to Richard Ellis for a copy of this talk at a memorial service for Süss. Biographical material below about Süss, not otherwise annotated, comes from the following sources, sometimes redundantly: Süss's *Lebenslauf* in Personalakten Süss in the archive at the Universität Freiburg (hereafter PAS); an article in the *Freiburg Wochenspiegel* 19/20 (Dec. 1957), and an obituary in the *Freiburger Studentenzeitung* 4 (June 1958), both also in PAS; as well as an obituary by Helmuth Gericke in *JDMV* 69 (1968): 161–183, and Ostrowski's eulogy.