



JOACHIM PRINZ **I SHALL NOT BE SILENT**

*“America must not become
a nation of onlookers.
America must not remain silent.”*

A Film by
Rachel Fisher and Rachel Pasternak

Excerpts of Prinz’s Writings Narrated by
Andre Braugher

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***A documentary film about a rabbi who would not be silenced,
from synagogues in 1930's Berlin to the March on Washington in 1963.***

Synopsis:

In Berlin in the 1930's, the civil rights of Jews were systematically stripped away. A young rabbi refused to be silent. His name was Joachim Prinz and he set out to restore the self-esteem of the German Jews. Knowing the Nazis were monitoring his every word, and despite repeated arrests, Prinz continued to preach about the value of Judaism. He saved many lives by encouraging Jews to emigrate from Germany.

Expelled from Germany in 1937, Prinz arrived in the United States, the land where democracy had supposedly triumphed over bigotry and hatred. Here, he witnessed racism against African Americans and realized the American ideal was not a reality.

As rabbi of Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark, NJ and later as President of the American Jewish Congress, Prinz became a leader of the civil rights movement. Prinz worked to



organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, declaring, "bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence." Moments later, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech.

Throughout his career, Prinz spoke out for justice, unconcerned with the popularity of his positions. He identified with the prophets, writing in a 1975 letter, "Remember the Biblical adage, 'For the sake of Zion, I shall not be silent.'"

Format: Color

Language: English

Running Time: 57 Minutes

Website: www.PrinzDocumentary.org
www.MenemshaFilms.com/Joachim-Prinz-I-Shall-Not-Be-Silent

Social Media: www.Facebook.com/PrinzDoc

Germany



Joachim Prinz was born in the tiny village of Burkhardtsdorf, Upper Silesia on May 10, 1902. His father Joseph, a man of stern demeanor was generally incapable of intimacy, owned the General Store. By contrast, his mother was an exceptionally loving woman, especially close to him, but also to his two younger brothers. Both parents came from well educated prosperous families who had lived in Germany for centuries. They were the only Jews in their town of 900. Around 1910, the family moved to Oppeln, a city of 35,000, which was the region's capital. It had a more substantial and relatively affluent Jewish community. Eventually, his father bought a large dry goods store which provided handsomely for the family.



Four years later, his beloved mother died after giving birth to his sister. Her death left an indelible mark. The distant relationship with his father, coupled with an inherently rebellious spirit, resulted in breaking the emotional bond with his family and, most particularly, with its way of life. Joseph Prinz, like many other German Jews, was born to a traditional Jewish family but had become highly assimilated. He was part of the Jewish community, but at the periphery. Motivated by a charismatic rabbi, Joachim Prinz' rejection of his father's world was expressed by an increasing interest in Judaism, a bond that grew even stronger with his mother's death. By 1917, he had also joined the Zionist Blau Weiss (Blue White) youth movement, which put him at odds with the vast majority of German Jews. To his father's great disappointment, he decided to become a rabbi.



By the age of 21, Joachim Prinz had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy, with a minor in Art History, at the University of Giessen. Two years later he was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau and married Lucie Horovitz, the daughter of one of its most renowned professors. Already showing special gifts and a dynamism that contrasted sharply with older, often pompous, colleagues, he was invited to become the rabbi of the then independent Friedenstempel (Peace Synagogue) in Berlin. Only 24, he almost immediately became what the noted scholar Rabbi W Gunther Plaut, who was a child in Berlin at the time, later described as "the country's most sought-after preacher." With powerful oratorical gifts and a new style of straight talk about Judaism and subjects of current interest, he was especially attractive to the young, but people of all ages flocked to his Sabbath services. "If you weren't on line at 7:30 for the 9 AM service," Rabbi Plaut recalled, "you were unlikely to be admitted to an always overflowing sanctuary." But his personal life was to be challenged. The death of Lucie at the birth of their daughter (named Lucie in her memory) in January 1931 was a tragic reminder of his mother's death and a devastating personal blow. In May of 1932, he married Hilde Goldschmidt. His new wife who, while younger, had been Lucie's friend in the last years of her life, became a mother to his infant daughter. In April of 1933 she safely gave birth to the a child of her own, Prinz' first son, Michael.



An urbane sophisticated and unconventional man, he broke down barriers of formality between pulpit and congregation by ice skating with his students and being personally accessible to their parents in what, increasingly, were becoming troubled times. To the great consternation of community's conservative rabbinical and lay leadership, the young, and what they considered brash, Dr. Prinz spoke out about the dangers of National Socialism long before Adolf Hitler took power in 1933. For the German Jewish community that dated back to the 4th Century, Hitler was seen as a temporary episode, as an outsider who couldn't possibly last in their homeland. To Joachim Prinz, who despite his natural affinity for urban life, had grown up in rural Germany where it was prevalent, anti-Semitism was not something new. To him, it was an ingrained fact of life across much of the country. He understood that Hitler was lethal and began early on to urge that Jews leave the country. Thousands took his advice, many thousands stayed and perished in the gas chambers. Life under Hitler was a nightmare. But throughout the next four years, Prinz continued to preach his message and was the subject of numerous arrests and harassment by the Gestapo.

During his eleven year rabbinate in Berlin, eventually serving the entire community and preaching in it's largest synagogue, he founded numerous educational and cultural institutions, officiated at thousands of Bar Mitzvahs, weddings and funerals and wrote seven books including a two volume Children's Bible and *Wir Juden*, a warning to the Jews about the danger they faced in the early 1930s. In his final year in Germany he served as editor-in-chief of a Jewish periodical. For reasons that he would never know (perhaps because he was such a popular figure) he was



expelled from the country in 1937 and together with his pregnant wife and two children sailed for New York.

Son Jonathan was born one month after their arrival in the United States. A few years after the end of World War II they adopted Jo Seelmann, Hilde's cousin who had lost her parents and was herself imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. Daughter Deborah was born in 1952.

The United States



In the fall of 1937, with the sponsorship of Stephen S. Wise, the noted American rabbi and confidant of President Franklin Roosevelt, Joachim Prinz began his life in the United States by lecturing across the country for the United Palestine Appeal about what was happening in Germany. His audiences were impressed with his oratory, but many, in a still isolationist land, rejected his message. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland, a political conservative and leader of the American Zionist Organization, was outraged by his "pessimism" which he considered Un-American, and complained bitterly to Wise questioning whether the refugee rabbi shouldn't find another country in which to live. Wise reminded his colleague that free speech was a touch stone of our democracy. Tragically, Prinz' warnings proved correct. In fact, they were an understatement of what was to come.



After two years of financial struggle and with a wife and three children to support, Joachim Prinz returned to the rabbinate accepting an invitation to become the spiritual leader of Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark New Jersey, one of the country's oldest synagogues. He assumed its pulpit in July of 1939. B'nai Abraham was housed in an enormous building complete with school, social center, gymnasium, swimming pool and a majestic 2,000 seat oval shaped sanctuary with a soaring hung ceiling with unobstructed views throughout. It was an ideal setting for a gifted preacher. His friend and mentor, Rabbi Wise spoke at the installation.



Temple B'nai Abraham had a magnificent home, but it was nearly bankrupt. Built only a few years before the Depression, many of its donors had defaulted on their pledges and only 300 families remained. The debts were staggering and Prinz' predecessor, forced into retirement, had long since failed to provide his congregation with any reason to be active or to attend services on a regular basis. Joachim Prinz changed all that. Fortunately, the year before he arrived, the Temple had engaged Abraham Shapiro, one of the great cantors of the twentieth century, whose voice was often compared with that of Enrico Caruso. Composer Max Helfman was brought on as music director. Shapiro's powerful tenor giving voice to Helfman's original music coupled with Prinz' memorable sermons, dramatically altered the tone of the Sabbath services. It wasn't unusual for 1000 people to attend on an ordinary Friday night. Prinz invigorated the educational program for both children and adults and forged strong personal relationships with congregants. All of this transformed the synagogue's profile and, in a relatively short time, membership soared along with a restoration of financial health. The outstanding current debt was erased followed some years later by the burning of the mortgage.

Once again Dr. Prinz was a force in a Jewish community. In 1945, as the war was coming to an end, he was asked to become chairman of the Essex County annual United Jewish Appeal Drive. Until then, they had raised no more that \$200,000 in any year. With a clear need to help displaced Jews in Europe, the goal was for \$1 Million. Prinz was the first and only rabbi ever to take on this task. He devoted enormous energy to the task and, to the astonishment of community leaders, came within a few dollars of the campaign goal. During the campaign, he become intimately engaged with the larger Jewish community and from then on was never again seen as simply the rabbi of an individual congregation.



In the years that followed, Joachim Prinz continued and expanded his involvement with the greater Jewish community, nationally and internationally. He held top leadership positions in the World Jewish Congress, first as its Vice President and ultimately Chairman of its Governing Council. Having reached maturity in Europe, he had a unique understanding of post-War problems there and devoted all of his summers from 1946 until his retirement years, traveling abroad. His first post-War trip included a moving visit to his destroyed Berlin synagogue. He was a director of the Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. His early

involvement in the Zionist movement had brought him into contact with the future founding leaders of the State of Israel, most of whom he counted among his good friends. He also served as Chairman of the World Conference of Jewish Organizations.

Perhaps closest to his heart, because he had been a victim of discrimination, was the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States. The American Jewish Congress was at the forefront of that effort. He served as its President from 1958-1966. He participated in countless demonstrations and other actions developing close relationships with his counterparts in the African American community. In 1963, he was among leaders of the March on Washington. His speech, alerting Americans to the disgrace of silence in the face of injustice, preceded that of his friend Martin Luther King, Jr. It was, he always felt, a highlight of his life, the culmination of all the things he had stood for throughout his career both in America and earlier in Germany.



Prinz helped his long time friend and world Jewish leader Nahum Goldmann create the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations and served as one of its early Chairmen (1965-7). He wrote three more books and edited several Prayer Books. In his last years as its senior rabbi, he helped his synagogue build and move to a new home in Livingston New Jersey. At its center was a sanctuary without stained glass windows, another of his lifelong radical departures from convention.

Worshippers look out into the natural surroundings becoming one with, rather than separated from, the outside. This expressed, he felt, a more open approach to religion consistent with a new time and the needs of the next generation.



Having served Temple B'nai Abraham for 38 years, he retired from an active role in 1977, but continued to preach on the High Holidays for several more years. Together with Hilde, he spent the final years of life in their little cottage in Brookside, New Jersey -- in a sense returning to where he began, a small country village. Joachim Prinz died September 30, 1988.

Filmmakers

Producers



Rachel Fisher and Rachel Pasternak are the principals of R2, a multimedia production company. They produced the documentary film *Remembering Oswiecim*. The film is shown daily at the Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oswiecim, Poland.

Rachel Pasternak holds a Master's Degree in Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary. While pursuing her graduate studies, Rachel obtained access to Joachim Prinz's private archives, conducted original research on Prinz, and wrote one of the first academic papers on his life and career. Rachel began her journalism career as a writer for the New Jersey Jewish News,

where she established her own column. More recently, her work has appeared on various blogs as well as in the New York Times.

Rachel Fisher earned a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She was the founding director of the Genealogy Institute at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan, where she developed the Samberg Family History program. She has consulted for several cultural institutions, including Beth Hatefutsoth (The Diaspora Museum) in Tel Aviv.

Stacey Reiss is an Emmy Award-winning producer who has produced hundreds of programs for a variety of networks including NBC, HBO, PBS and Discovery. Her recent documentary *I Knew It Was You*, about the late actor John Cazale, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

Editors

David Mehlman is an award winning filmmaker and editor whose documentaries have shown on HBO/Cinemax, PBS, ABC, A&E, MTV, TCM, Discovery, The History Channel and film festivals both internationally and throughout the United States. He edited two Oscar-winning films: *The Moon and the Son* (Best Animated Short, 2005), which he also sound designed; and he was supervising editor of FREEHELD (Best Documentary Short, 2007). He was one of the editors of the 2011 Oscar-nominated documentary feature, *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory*.

Benno Schoberth is an award-winning editor and filmmaker originally from Aachen, Germany. With over twenty years of experience, working on both narrative and documentary films, his work has been seen on most networks and cable channels including PBS, ABC, CBS, History, Discovery, A&E, TLC, BRAVO and MTV. His documentary work includes the acclaimed two hour special *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* which aired on PBS.

Advisory Committee

Alan Berliner is an artist and filmmaker whose works include *Intimate Stranger* (1991), *Nobody's Business* (1996) and *The Sweetest Sound* (2001). A recipient of Rockefeller, Guggenheim and Jerome Foundation Fellowships, Berliner has won three Emmy Awards (he has also received six nominations) from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. He was the recipient of a Distinguished Achievement Award from the International Documentary Association in 1993. In 2002, Berliner was awarded a "Cultural Achievement Award in the Arts" by the National Foundation For Jewish Culture.

Cory A. Booker is a United States Senator from New Jersey, and previously served as Mayor of Newark. He took the oath of office as Mayor of New Jersey's largest city on July 1, 2006 following a sweeping electoral victory and was re-elected to a second term on May 11, 2010. Mayor Booker's political career began in 1998, after serving as Staff Attorney for the Urban Justice Center in Newark. He rose to prominence as Newark's Central Ward Councilman. During his four years of service from 1998-2002, then-Councilman Booker earned a reputation as a leader with innovative ideas and bold actions, from increasing security in public housing to building new playgrounds. This work was the foundation for his leadership as Mayor. Reflecting his commitment to education, Mayor Booker is a member of numerous boards and advisory committees including Democrats for Education Reform, Columbia University Teachers' College Board of Trustees and the Black Alliance for Educational Options. Mayor Booker received his B. A. and M. A. from Stanford University, a B. A. in Modern History at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and completed his law degree at Yale University.

Clifford Kulwin is rabbi of Temple B'nai Abraham in Livingston, New Jersey. He formerly served as a congregational rabbi in Rio de Janeiro and spent nearly two decades overseeing international expansion of the Reform movement through the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Michael A. Meyer is the Adolph S. Ochs Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. He is the international president of the Leo Baeck Institute. One of the foremost scholars of modern Jewish history, Professor Meyer has published numerous academic works, three of which have won Jewish Book Awards. Professor Meyer was the editor of *Joachim Prinz, Rebellious Rabbi: An Autobiography—the German and Early American Years* (2007).

Deborah Prinz is the executive director of the Achieve Foundation of South Orange & Maplewood (NJ), a local education foundation. She is chairperson of the New Jersey Jewish Film Festival and a director of GreenFaith, New Jersey's interfaith coalition for the environment. She is a member of the State of New Jersey Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission and a trustee of Temple B'nai Abraham in Livingston.

Jonathan J. Prinz served alongside his father as a rabbi of Temple B'nai Abraham during the 1960s. After leaving the pulpit, he spent nearly a decade as an executive on Wall Street. Since that time he has been a consultant in corporate and brand communications. The firm of which he was a principal and president served major corporations and, among others, helped launch Diet Coke, one of the most successful new products of all time. Today, in addition to consulting on his own, he is writing a book about increasing number of Americans who have left religion behind.

Lucie Prinz was a staff editor at The Atlantic Monthly for 23 years. She has been the co-author of three books, including *170 Years of Show Business* by Kate Mostel and Madeline Gilford and *The Joy of Insight* by internationally renowned physicist Victor Weisskopf. Her writing has been published in The New York Times and The Atlantic Monthly. She is a freelance editor and lives in Massachusetts.

Credits

Executive Producers

Andre & Kelly Hunter

Directors and Producers

Rachel Eskin Fisher & Rachel Nierenberg Pasternak

Producer

Stacey Reiss

Associate Producer

Deborah Prinz

Editors

Benno Schoberth

David Mehlman

Brian Brodeur

Director of Photography

Craig Feldman

Composer

Ben Decter

Excerpts of Prinz's Writings Narrated by

Andre Braugher

Narration

Stephanie Nasteff

Graphic Design

Mark Palkoski

Archival Research

Jane Ellis Tucker

Stephanie Palumbo

Andrew Horn

Post Production

ACIEM Studios

Sound Mix

Brian Brodeur



I speak to you as an American Jew.

As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience — one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say:

Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe. Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such

sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

Our children, yours and mine in every school across the land, each morning pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the republic for which it stands. They, the children, speak fervently and innocently of this land as the land of "liberty and justice for all."

The time, I believe, has come to work together — for it is not enough to hope together, and it is not enough to pray together — to work together that this children's oath, pronounced every morning from Maine to California, from North to South, may become a glorious, unshakeable reality in a morally renewed and united America.

**Address by Rabbi JOACHIM PRINZ, President of the AMERICAN JEWISH CONGRESS,
at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Lincoln Memorial, Aug. 28, 1963**



THE ISSUE IS SILENCE



Address by Rabbi JOACHIM PRINZ, President of the AMERICAN JEWISH CONGRESS, at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Lincoln Memorial, Aug. 28, 1963

The Plot for America: Remembering Civil Rights Leader Joachim Prinz

The influential Newark rabbi was a confidante of Martin Luther King,
but he's been all but ignored by history

By Allan Nadler
February 25, 2011



Joachim Prinz speaking at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. (Courtesy Lucie Prinz)

I.

On the evening of June 26, 1937, thousands of Berlin Jews packed the city's grand Brüdervereinshaus to bid farewell to Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who had been ordered by the Gestapo to leave Germany immediately or face an almost certain death sentence for political subversion. Prinz had been the most popular, outspoken, and inspirational champion of Jewish national rights and Zionism in the dark years since the Nazis' rise to power, preaching to overflow crowds at Berlin's most important temples about the need to leave Germany and

immigrate to Palestine. By the summer of 1937 he had already been arrested a half-dozen times by the Gestapo, but he always managed to elude deportation. This time, however, he was warned by his “friend” and informant, Gestapo Obersturmbanführer Kuchman, that his days were numbered, and he reluctantly decided to emigrate to the United States, sponsored by his friend and patron Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. Among the uninvited guests at Prinz’s farewell was a Nazi functionary, Adolf Eichmann.

Eichmann’s presence was to have important legal ramifications more than two decades later. In the initial discovery proceedings to establish Eichmann’s identity before his 1961 trial in Jerusalem, Benno Cohen, the foremost Zionist leader in pre-war Berlin, positively identified the defendant, testifying as follows:

We held a valedictory meeting to take leave of Rabbi Dr. Joachim Prinz who was leaving the country. He was one of the finest speakers, the best Zionist propagandist in those years. The large hall was packed full. The public thronged to this meeting. Suddenly, as chairman of the event, I was called to the door and my office clerk told me, “Mr Eichmann is here.” I saw this same man, for the first time in civilian clothing, and he shouted at me, “Who is responsible for order here? This is disorder of the first degree.” ... I watched him the entire time from my place in the chair.

As a young rabbi in his late twenties, Prinz was already addressing congregations of thousands in Berlin’s largest temple, the magnificent Neue Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse, whose stunning façade has recently been restored. And less than two years after arriving in the United States after his expulsion from Germany by Eichmann’s goons, he was appointed rabbi of New Jersey’s largest Jewish house of worship, the magnificent Greek Revival Temple B’nai Abraham, which towered over Newark’s then-fashionable and heavily Jewish Clinton Hill section, where hundreds of young people swarmed to hear his Friday-night orations.

As Prinz so evidently delights in repeatedly recalling in his posthumously published memoir, *Rebellious Rabbi*, the Jews of both Berlin and Newark—especially “the younger generation” to whom he mainly dedicated his ministries—did not so much “go to shul” for an encounter with the divine as they “went to Prinz” for an encounter with the rabbi. The combination of Prinz’s charismatic personality and his distinctly un-theological and nationalistic understanding of the essence of Judaism proved as attractive to the nervously Americanizing Jews of mid-20th-century New Jersey as it had been to the deeply assimilated and newly imperiled Jews of early Nazi Germany. Prinz’s nationalist theology was first expressed in his classic work of Jewish defiance, *Wir Juden*, which was published in Berlin in 1934 and quickly became a best-seller among Germany’s deeply demoralized Jews. He used his experiences leading the Jews of Nazi Berlin to develop an almost metaphysical notion of Jewish national identity, which he referred to as the “doctrine of Jewish inescapability.”

Prinz’s initial, exploratory visit to the United States, in March 1937, just a half year before his final emigration from Germany, was marked by all manner of disappointments with the “Golden Land.” Prinz complained bitterly about America’s complacency in the face of the threat posed by Nazi Germany. In his first recorded impressions of the country, he found almost nothing that compared favorably with his native Germany. America’s cities are

depicted as ugly and rundown, racism against blacks disturbingly pervasive, its political culture naïve and intellectual life second-rate, and its people primitive and poorly dressed.

“My first impression with America was dreadful,” he wrote. Prinz arrived in Hoboken and described the scene as “not impressive, the houses were decrepit and the streets were dirty. The richest country in the world did not present itself to me as a place of glamour and prosperity.”

But, already during this first visit, Prinz was inspired by an unexpected section of New York—Harlem. “I remember being particularly interested in Harlem,” he wrote. “It was at that time that I heard for the first time what is now commonplace, namely speeches about Black Nationalism. Upon my return to Germany I wrote an article that was entitled ‘Zionism in Black.’”

And in June 1937, shortly before he finally emigrated with his family to the United States, Prinz published a stinging indictment of American racism, “Ámerika, hast du es besser?” in the Berlin liberal Jewish journal *Der Morgen*: “When people in New York City describe a neighborhood as being nice, they are not referring to its parks, trees or wide boulevards. They are talking about the fact that there are no blacks, Italians and Jews in that ‘nice’ part of the city.”

Prinz’s brave defiance of the Nazis, and his understanding of Jewish identity in primarily national, if not quite racial, terms, emboldened him to speak his mind when he encountered all forms of racism in the United States after he immigrated in August 1937. During his first foray outside New Jersey, to Atlanta, where he had been invited to address various Jewish organizations just three months after his arrival in the country, Prinz came face-to-face with Southern Jewish racism. Before his first engagement, speaking to members of the local Zionist leadership, Prinz scheduled a morning meeting with the Bible scholar and black Methodist bishop Willis Jefferson King, at the time professor of Old Testament at Gammon Theological Seminary, a black institution. Upon arriving in Atlanta, while making his way to King’s home, Prinz noticed a huge Coca-Cola sign, which at that time constituted Atlanta’s skyline, as the beverage company was the city’s largest business. Here is Prinz’s remarkable recollection of the subsequent events of that day:

After I left the Seminary, it was time for me to go and address a luncheon given in my honor by three Zionist groups. I was greeted by the people in charge of the affair and shortly thereafter one of them said to me, “I hear that you visited that nigger at the black seminary and even invited the nigger to dine with you tonight.” I was completely speechless. But I managed to respond that it was true that I visited with a great scholar and had a very interesting time with him. But I could not help adding that I was shocked to hear such words from a Jewish group welcoming a Hitler refugee. ... I asserted that what was evidently happening to the black people of America was the very same thing that was happening to the Jews of Europe. There was an embarrassed silence ... after which one of the Jews asked me: “Would the rabbi care for a drink?” ... I immediately responded that I would like nothing better, hoping for a stiff alcoholic drink, not merely intoxicating but anaesthetizing for a pain I can hardly describe. Someone then brought me a glass of Coca Cola. That was the first time, and the very

last time in my life that I drank Coca Cola. In all the forty years that have elapsed since 1937, Coca Cola was for me a symbol of hatred and prejudice with which I did not want to be identified.

Prinz could hardly have imagined at the time that more than a quarter of a century later he was to share these very same sentiments with what was to become the largest audience he, or any other American rabbi, was ever to address—the quarter of a million people who gathered on the National Mall for the “March on Washington for Jobs” on August 28, 1963, a historic event that Prinz often referred to in subsequent speeches and writings as the “most memorable religious experience of my life,” and of which he was one the principle organizers.

Following a stirring rendition of “I’ve Been Buked and Scorned” by the so-called Queen of Gospel, Mahalia Jackson (Prinz, clearly moved by Jackson’s performance, prefaced his speech by declaring, “I wish I could sing!”) and speaking just prior to Dr. King’s legendary “I Have a Dream” oration, Prinz mesmerized the marchers with a speech that was as bold as it was brief, and as inspiring as it was passionate. Opening with the words “I speak to you as an American Jew,” Prinz launched a powerful indictment of American silence in the wake of that era’s violent racism in the Deep South, an apathy that he controversially compared to the silence of “ordinary Germans” during the early years of the Third Reich.

(Curious about Prinz’s proud vow of cola abstinence, I’d contacted Prinz’s son, Rabbi Jonathan Prinz, who confirmed that Coca-Cola was not allowed in the Prinz family home. But he added a literally refreshing footnote. The day of the March on Washington was especially hot and humid, the younger Rabbi Prinz recalled. His father was parched after the speeches and joined other members of the roster at a VIP tent at the front of the Mall, in search of a cool beverage; to his dismay, the only drink available was Coca-Cola, which both rabbis Prinz happily consumed with great gusto.)



Joachim Prinz, two to the left of Martin Luther King, in the Oval Office with President John F. Kennedy and other Civil Rights leaders on the day of the March on Washington.

(Cecil W. Stoughton via John F. Kennedy Library)

As his personal correspondence from the late 1950s indicates, Prinz was the first rabbi to reach out to Martin Luther King Jr. When Prinz was installed as President of the American Jewish Congress at its May 1958 convention in Miami, King was—at Prinz’s insistence—the keynote speaker. It was the

first time the civil rights leader had ever addressed a white audience south of the Mason-Dixon line. Less than two years later, King addressed an overflow crowd from Prinz’s pulpit at B’nai Abraham in Newark, New Jersey’s most prestigious Jewish pulpit.

Prinz’s activism was widely criticized, and it must be said not entirely unreasonably, by neo-conservative Jewish intellectuals such as Milton Himmelfarb and Norman Podhoretz, and even

more so by many conservative members of his own congregation. These members were especially troubled by what they derided as his public Civil Rights “stunts”; when, for example, in 1960, he organized and led the picket line in front of Woolworth’s flagship Manhattan store on Fifth Avenue to protest the store’s segregated lunch counters in the South. Prinz, who helped the Jews of Berlin withstand the Nazis’ anti-Jewish boycotts, regularly used his bully pulpit as the president of the AJC to urge boycotts of several major national department stores: Woolworth’s, Kress’s, Kresge’s, and Grant’s among them, issuing a statement on March 25, 1960, that proclaimed in the name of the AJC, “We do not accept the thesis that businesses may solicit the patronage of Negro customers in all other departments and deny them the right to equal service in the consumption of food and beverage. ... We therefore support the call [to boycott] and add our voice.”

While the large majority of American Jewish leaders were growing cold toward the cause due to the rise of radical black identity politics that were inflected with no small degree of anti-Semitism, Prinz’s commitment, and his sense of personal affinity with the black experience in America, never waned, even after he was held up at knife-point by a black hitch-hiker he picked up while driving to Shabbat services at B’nai Abraham. (Prinz loved to recall that upon first seeing the knife pointed at his throat, he solemnly informed his assailant, “Young man, I’ll have you know that I marched with Dr. King,” to which his assailant responded, “Look, man, I don’t give a fuck who your doctor is; just give me your damn money!”) and later mugged by an intruder in his own office at B’nai Abraham.

Largely because of his insistence on not abandoning the deteriorating city, B’nai Abraham remained the last of Newark’s major synagogues to relocate to the suburbs west of the city, finally moving in 1973 to Livingston, where it thrives to this day. Newark’s leading Reform Temple, B’nai Jeshurun, led by the highly respected Rabbi Ely Pilchik, had already relocated in 1968 to a magnificent, indeed ostentatious, new building on a hilltop overlooking the suburb of Short Hills, a grand structure that featured a soaring pointed steeple. A few of Prinz’s congregants decided that showing Prinz this impressive new building might help convince him that B’nai Abraham ought to abandon Newark for a glorious future in the suburbs. Upon driving by B’nai Jeshurun and gazing up at the synagogue’s towering steeple, Prinz quipped that this was “Pilchik’s final erection.”

Prinz was especially embittered by his fellow rabbis’ abandonment of the Civil Rights cause. He concluded his keynote address to the 1970 national convention of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly—although Prinz was trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, Germany, as a Conservative rabbi, he removed B’nai Abraham from the conservative movement, declaring the congregation, and himself, “independent”—by upbraiding the more than 250 rabbis present, and American Jews more generally, for having “retreated back into their own Jewish ghetto” abandoning what he continued to insist was an essentially Jewish moral cause:

Less and less do the lists of the peace movements and the movements of urban reform and those crying out against injustice and inequality for the Black community contain Jewish names. Most of the people, particularly you rabbis, have withdrawn into their comfortable ghettos. Instead of leading the people, you are following. Jews are among the most bigoted people in the world. Jewish leadership, instead of

reprimanding them for it and cursing them up and down, as did the ancient Prophets, has followed their ranks.

II.

Prinz's identification with the plight of African Americans was inextricably bound with his own passionate, life-long commitment to Zionism. The earliest stirrings of black pride in America obviously touched a sensitive personal nerve in Prinz, whose road to Jewish religion and Zionism was a rocky one resisted by his grandfather, father, and hometown rabbi, just as civil rights was for many of the young black pioneers of the movement, who, especially in the deep south, rebelled against the long complacency of their elders. As he recalls in his memoir:

My Jewish emptiness, which was caused by the perfunctory and assimilationist Jewish attitude of my community, including my own father, left a void inside me that made me search for something to fill it. It was at that time that I began to discover that there was something in Jewish life that was new, but rejected by the vast majority of the Jewish people. It was the Zionist movement. I ordered Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* from our bookstore, since the library of the Jewish community did not carry it. I read it feverishly, including the last sentence: "If you will it, it will not be a fairy tale." ... In speaking with my rabbi about it he warned me against such a foolish idea that could only lead to a Jewish disaster and create ... a betrayal of the German patriotism to which we were all wedded.

Prinz recalls his father having a slice of ham with breakfast each day and describes him as "a great patriot and believer in Germany ... an assimilated Jew to whom Zionism was anathema, who was religiously very mixed up ... but aware of my oratorical talents." When his father lay ill, mistakenly believing that he was on his deathbed (the most Jewish thing about the elder Prinz appears to have been that he was seriously psychosomatic), he asked Joachim to take a solemn oath swearing never to become a rabbi. In one of the memoir's very few examples of conceding to the beliefs, or even sensitivities, of another human being, Prinz, with fingers crossed behind his back, obliged, "knowing that I was lying to him."

Prinz, like many other famous Central European Jewish intellectuals of the interwar era—from Franz Kafka to Gershom Scholem—bristled at and rebelled definitively against their fathers' and grandfathers' assimilation. The experience of ministering over the return of deeply alienated and assimilated German Jews to their Jewish roots during the Nazi era not only deepened Prinz's Zionist convictions but also shaped his thinking about the one unshakable belief that permeated his preaching and writings for the remainder of his life—the idea of the "inescapable" nature of Jewish identity. Though they might be able physically to hide their national identity in a way America's blacks could not, all Jews—no matter how determined or desperate to escape it—were bound together by an inescapable destiny.

Aside from his Jewish identity, there was another matter that Rabbi Prinz seemed, at least personally, to find utterly inescapable: the male sexual drive. In his memoirs, Prinz repeatedly expressed disdain for the idea of monogamy. In the course of his overly lengthy and explicit recollections of his premarital sexual adventures, including those with the woman who was to become his first wife, Lucie (whom Prinz offers was sexually "very well trained and far

superior to me,” having “herself invented” certain coital techniques previously unknown to humankind), there is the following description of their adolescent loss of innocence, which even Woody Allen might find too absurd to keep in a script: “I remember the first time we slept together was after a long walk through the woods, and our bed was the field. The moon was shining brightly, the stars were above us, and I thought of Kant’s famous line in his Critique of Pure Reason in which he discussed the relationship of moon, stars and the moral conscience.”



Joachim Prinz and other Civil Rights leaders at the Lincoln Memorial for the March on Washington. National Archives

Prinz’s second wife, Hilde, whom he predeceased by six years and with whom he by all accounts, including his own, enjoyed a wonderful marriage, is also not spared. In his recollection of their honeymoon on a freighter bound for Italy, Prinz offers the following passage, which, as always, offers an exalted literary reference in connection with the act of coitus: “Hilde, young and pretty and I, young and handsome, spent a fantastic time on the boat which, of course, had much influence on the sex, helped along by the movement of the ocean. It reminded us of the poem dealing with the waves of

the sea and the movement of the heart.”

Such evidence of Prinz’s taste for great sex and great writing—best experienced in mutual climax—might explain the fact that he alone among America’s leading rabbis was a very early admirer of Newark’s most notorious Jewish son, Philip Roth. While Roth’s sensational debut works, *Goodbye Columbus* in 1959 and, a decade later, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, earned him the immediate scorn of America’s most prestigious rabbis, and Roth’s name became synonymous with a particularly shmutzig form of Jewish self-loathing, Prinz was energetically promoting him. Prinz sponsored Roth’s first trip to Israel, in 1963, as part of the “Encounters” conferences that he organized as president of the American Jewish Congress, at which Roth appeared on a panel with Leslie Fiedler and the celebrated Israeli writer Aharon Megged.

History has not been terribly kind to Joachim Prinz; he has all but been forgotten, and he has not been the subject of a single scholarly study or biography. But his support of Philip Roth at the dawn of his literary career, utterly unique among his clerical contemporaries, has not gone unrewarded, resulting in his exposure to a vastly larger popular readership than that ever enjoyed by a rabbi, let alone a Jewish historian.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz emerges as the great Jewish hero and main opponent of the nefarious Jewish quisling of America’s fascist President Lindbergh, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, toward the end of Roth’s counter-historical novel, *The Plot Against America*. While Bengelsdorf is a fictional character, all the other rabbis who appear in the novel are historical figures, including Prinz’s most prominent colleagues in the Newark rabbinate. But, as is always the

case in Roth's writings, his portrait of these rabbis is more than a bit miserable—except for that of Joachim Prinz, who is the only one of the lot to stand up both to the Lindbergh Administration and to Rabbi Bengelsdorf, whose daughter's wedding, alone among Newark's rabbis, he boycotts. Roth writes, "Rabbi Prinz's authority among Jews throughout the city, in the wider Jewish community, and among scholars and theologians of every religion had far exceeded his elder colleagues, and it is he alone of the rabbis leading the city's three wealthiest congregations who never flinched in his opposition to Lindbergh."

And so when, in the novel, Newark's Jews fear a pogrom, similar to those spreading like prairie fires across America, it is Prinz who rises to their defense by establishing the government-sanctioned Committee of Concerned Jewish Citizens—in unofficial tandem with his friend Longy Zwillman's creation of an illicit Jewish militia that roams the Jew-lined streets of Weequahic and Clinton Hill. (Zwillman was in fact a member of B'nai Abraham, and Prinz officiated at his mob cohorts' weddings and at Zwillman's funeral.) The novel's young protagonist imagines the murderous flood of anti-Semitic violence that would have overcome Newark's Jews were it not for Prinz:

a nightmarish vision of America's anti-Semitic fury roaring Eastward and surging onto Liberty Avenue straight into our alleyway and on up our back stairs like the water of a flood, had it not been for the sturdy barrier presented by the gleaming bay haunches of the horses of the Newark Police force, whose strength and speed and beauty Newark's preeminent rabbi, the nobly named Prinz, had caused to materialize at the end of our street.

While ostensibly fictional, Roth's projection of Prinz's role in his nightmarish vision of the fate of Newark's Jews in fascist America is perfectly consistent with the historical record of Prinz's career, which Roth knew well. Indeed, the theme of one of Prinz's earliest sermons at B'nai Abraham was a fierce denunciation of American fascism, during which he aimed particularly sharp jabs at Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and their racist acolytes. Alas, rabbis of Prinz's intellectual caliber, clarity of vision, and courage survive today almost only in the world of fiction.

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