

# Genius & Anxiety by Norman Lebrecht

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

*Genius and Anxiety: How Jews changed the World 1847-1947* by Norman Lebrecht, is the best, popular Jewish interest book in years. It is an amazing collection of stories about the widest possible range of Jews – whole Jews, half Jews and ex-Jews – spanning the century from 1847 to 1947. It is fun to read, told with infectious humor and insight. It is both informing and entertaining and reflects the genius of Norman Lebrecht, himself. He is a well-known music critic and journalist. He has written on Mahler and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Music. He has written novels that draw on his deep experience of Orthodox Jewish life. His book, *The Song of Names*, has just been made into a movie. Deeply knowledgeable and religious, he is a Renaissance man of Twenty First century Jewish life. He is also one of the nicest, most modest, talented Jews I know.

You might say the central thesis of the book is that Jews produce brilliant men and women who contribute to society and human affairs way beyond our numbers. Yet, almost every person mentioned in this book, in addition to being prodigiously talented, was seriously emotionally damaged or neurotic in one way or another. They're not exactly lovable either. Lebrecht gives us a fascinating roll call of known, unknown and forgotten geniuses in almost every area of human endeavor – political, musical, artistic, literary, academic and religious. The book is an education and a romp through Western culture.

Many of the most famous characters he describes tried their best to repudiate or hide their Jewish origins or identities. Felix Mendelssohn, grandson of the great Moses Mendelssohn, was baptized at seven. He was a brilliant musician and composer who was desperate to be recognized as a German composer but reviled by Wagner as a Jew. He died a disappointed man in 1847 at the age of thirty-eight. Heinrich Heine was one of the greatest of German poets. He was a proponent of Jewish scholarship in his younger years.

He, too, converted claiming "it was a ticket of admission to European culture."

Heine met Karl Marx who tried to convert him to Marxism. Marx's father, descended from great rabbis, converted with his children (though his wife did not) in order to succeed in German society as a lawyer. Marx, who wrote crude anti-Semitism, was deeply ashamed of being Jewish and condemned Judaism as a barbaric religion.

Benjamin Disraeli was born into a Jewish family which converted out of pique. He wrote novels with positive Jewish characters and

rose up “the greasy pole” of politics to become Prime Minister and a confidant of Queen Victoria. He was openly proud of his Jewish heritage and flaunted it.

Yet he remained an exotic outsider – mistrusted and despised as a Jew.

Marcel Proust, the giant of French literature, was born to a Jewish mother but brought up in a society that looked down on Jews and spawned the Dreyfuss scandal. Despite it all, Proust was interested in Judaism. And Kafka, who also rebelled against his father’s Judaism, returned to his Jewish roots before his premature death.

Sigmund Freud, who was born into an orthodox family and educated in Jewish things, claimed not to have any knowledge of Judaism whatsoever and resented being type cast as a Jew in Vienna at a time when anti-Semitism was fashionable and rampant. He despised religion as a kind of pathology and refused to allow his wife to light shabbat candles. He, too, desperately sought recognition and acceptance .

Vienna, in particular, produced many brilliant but deeply flawed cultural iconic Jews who wanted to be accepted but were not.

Schnitzler

and Stefan Zweig were best-selling authors. Mahler, the great composer, converted to Christianity for the sake of his career and promotion. Arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein was born

into a family that had converted to Christianity and only came to accept his Jewish roots under Nazism.

Germany produced many giants, too. Albert Einstein rejected his Jewish religious background. He married out. He was rejected by social and

scientific societies for being Jewish. Yet his ambition and brilliance helped him become one of the most influential scientists of all time. He did not try to hide his Jewish heritage or support for a Jewish homeland. But he disavowed any interest in religion. Once,

on a visit to Jerusalem, he saw Hassidim at the Western Wall and described them

as having a past but no future. On this, as it turned out, he was remarkably wrong. Germany produced a long list of

Jews, all deeply flawed and conflicted, who had hoped to be integrated into German society but came back to Judaism and enriched Jewish thought. Names like Buber, Rosenzweig, Scholem and Walter Benjamin.

Famous names, one after another, crop up in every chapter. Sarah Bernhardt, Amedeo Modigliani, Schoenberg, Leonard Bernstein, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and a host of others who contributed to science, medicine, music, art and culture in its widest sense.

There are rabbis in his book, too. From Samson Raphael Hirsch to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Moses Gaster, Solomon Schechter, Solomon Schoenfeld and Samuel Adler of Temple Emanuel. Lebrecht is as eclectic in his choice of rabbis as in his musical taste.

Zionism, too, finds its place in the book. Herzl, Arlosoroff, Weitzman and Ben Gurion. They are all interspersed with anecdotes, scandals, disappointments and personal experiences. Some of them refused to acknowledge their Jewish birth. Some reluctantly and others finally reconciling. All of them tortured souls, deracinated and conflicted. The price of genius, Jewish roots and genes.

It is staggering how so much amazing creativity comes from such a small and much despised people. How does one explain it? Was it their Jewish alienation? The underlying theme of this book is that it was the cocktail of Genius and anxiety that both damaged them and yet drove them on.

There is innate genius and talent, of course. But why so concentrated? Judaism has a long tradition of scholarship, study and questioning which can remain even after quitting. There is a deep-seated sense of alienation and of being rejected which spurs one on to succeed. Economic disadvantage and poverty can also play a part in motivating people. The insecurity of always being moved on can act as a stimulus to valuing security. But all this can cause neurosis, a persecution complex or a chip on one's shoulder that often gets in the way of human relationships and make people very difficult to love or get on with. And yes, it is true that all this can be said of other minorities.

As the joke goes – Jews are the same as everyone else, except more so!

This was an era when doors were opened to Jews as well as closed. Most Jews wanted to escape the ghettos and did. The vast majority of these great minds reacted against their Jewishness. One is left with the impression that only the non-religious of us contributed to non-Jewish society.

Yet if you read this book, you will see another side.

The irony of it all is that, a hundred years after a time when it seemed talented Jews were all abandoning Judaism, a Jewish State and Orthodoxy is growing exponentially. For the first time, openly Orthodox Jews are listed amongst the Nobel Prize Winners.

And, for all that, anti-Semitism still thrives. As proud Jews and equal citizens, we are contributing to every aspect of the world around us – probably more than ever before.

This book, with all its information, style and humor is an

absolute delight. I urge you to read it.