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## A Sidelong Glance on a Forgotten Corner

Wassermann's book focuses on the years of the Weimar Republic and adds to the abundant literature on the history of Jewish studies and its place in Jewish history



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"False Start: Jewish Studies at German Universities during the Weimar Republic" by Henry Wassermann, Humanity Books, New York, 253 pages

On two occasions - in 1843 and in 1848 - Leopold Zunz, one of the founders of Wissenschaft des Judentums [the 19th-century movement of scientific investigation of Judaism] in Germany, suggested to the powers-that-be in Prussia that a chair in Jewish history and literature be established at a German university. He was turned down flat both times. One of the reasons offered for the rejection - a feeling that was shared by the illustrious historian Leonold von Ranke - was that such a position would help



In subsequent years, several similar proposals were rejected, due to the inability to conceive of priests and high-school teachers learning from Jews, and the narrow-mindedness of the Christian faculty members. As a substitute for – and imitation of – the German university, German Jews established the rabbinical seminary in Breslau (1845), the Juedische Hochschule (School for Jewish Learning) in Berlin (1872) and the (Orthodox) rabbinical seminary in Berlin (1873).

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At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the opportunity to acquire an academic education, even in disciplines that had nothing to do with Jewish studies, was not denied to those Jews who wanted it. On the other hand, as Yitzhak Schorsch noted, the doctorate became the trademark of the modern rabbi. From 1815 on, rabbis studied at German universities and received doctoral degrees (only from the late 1840s were Jews able to hold academic posts).

The fact that none of the leaders of Wissenschaft des Judentums ever taught Bible or Jewish history of the Second Temple period at Heidelberg, Gottingen, Berlin or Halle, did not adversely affect development of the discipline and its grand achievements. In other words: The number of faculty positions in German universities, or the academic standing of the faculty members, are not proper criteria for gauging the magnitude of the contribution of German-Christian and German-Jewish researchers to Jewish studies, describing the revolutionary impact of Jewish studies on the Jews, or



period (a "dialogue" whose previous chapter was described at length not long ago in Christian Wiese's book about Wissenschaft des Judentums and Protestant theology in Wilhelmine Germany).

### Partly amusing story

Henry Wassermann's book focuses on the years of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) and adds another branch to the abundant literature on the history of Jewish studies and its place in Jewish history. Until the Weimar days, Jewish studies were absent from the curriculum of German universities. The atmosphere of the Republic, which separated between religion and state, was much more relaxed than in Wilhelmine Germany, and opened up new opportunities. However, says Wassermann, the manner in which these opportunities were exploited was both unexceptional and faulty. The reason for this had to do with the fact that the people chosen to fill the junior academic positions at the universities of Leipzig, Halle, Hamburg, Gissen, Bonn, and Breslau were mainly mediocre (and worse) scholars who had not contributed anything valuable to Jewish studies. Primarily, three Jewish scholars fall into this category: Yisrael Isser Kahan, Lazar Gulkowitsch (the only one to become a professor), Moses Waskin (and several others), and five Christian scholars: Paul Fiebig, Walter Windoffer, Hugo Gressmann, Gerhard Kittel and Paul Kahle.

The story of their careers, writings and the reception given them by the



special interests, hypocrisies, schemes and the power games played out in the academic context. It is for the most part an amusing story, albeit in less-than-amusing circumstances. In fact, I found myself feeling a measure of empathy for the "research weaklings," waging a war of survival, under difficult circumstances and in a hostile environment. Jews and Christians at times revealed admirable courage, fighting a public struggle against anti-Semitism and Nazism (among the Christians, Windoffer and Kahle in particular). Incidentally, a significant portion of their German colleagues – including respected professors – did not always leave behind any published works of value.

Why is it that people who were not from the first rank won the sought-after positions when it would have been possible to fill these positions with scholars that had solid reputations and proven accomplishments?

Wassermann pins the blame more on the shenanigans of academia, which at times prefers weaklings, and less on the anti-Jewish posture of their colleagues, university powers-that-be and state authorities. But based on the story he tells, the Jews that were lucky enough to win these junior academic postings had a hard time maintaining their independence, and some were in fact designated as research assistants and even proofreaders for their German patrons – among them, those who understood that it was impossible to understand the history of Christianity and of Jewish history of the Second Temple period and onward without being fluent in the rabbinic literature. In any event, it is obvious that any self-respecting Jewish scholar would never agree to fill such a post.

### **Negative example**

The career of Dr. Lazar Gulkowitsch in Leipzig serves Wassermann as an example of how not to establish and promote a new discipline, but I get the feeling that the opening of a new discipline and its quality were not at the forefront of the interests of the University of Leipzig. It can also be claimed that the inferior quality of the research harmed the prestige of Jewish studies, but its prestige was not dependent on the aforementioned group of



become familiar with quality Jewish research knew where to go and what to read.

It is also hard to know if the handful of Jewish students who chose to study Judaism at a German university was so small as a result of the inferior quality of the teachers, or because they preferred to study in Jewish institutions for other reasons. No German university offered a full curriculum in Jewish studies, only selected courses.

It may be said in favor of the "weaklings," such as the priest Paul Fiebig of Leipzig, that they advocated familiarity with the rabbinic literature as a means of gaining a better understanding of the development of ancient Christianity. This belief contrasted sharply with the customary wisdom – or better yet, the common prejudice in Christian theology – which viewed latter-day biblical Judaism ("rabbinic Judaism") as an inferior and negative Judaism, and which felt that any assertion that ancient Christianity was influenced by Judaism adversely affected the uniqueness and originality of Christianity. This merit balances out their demerit – the fact that their research was insubstantial and flawed.

Wassermann believes that anti-Semitism in the university world (and in the authorities that controlled that world) was not the reason for the negligible status accorded Jewish studies in the universities of Germany during the Weimar period. He pins most of the blame on the academic hubris of the German professors, who believed they knew better than the Jewish scholars who had graduated from rabbinical seminaries.

Was it really only their arrogance that played a role here? Wassermann's book proves that in spite of the depth and breadth of the "theological dialogue" and the "historical dialogue" between Jews and Germans in Wilhelmine Germany and in Weimar Germany, the call for critically and "objectively" investigating the sources of Christianity and Judaism and shaking off prejudices toward rabbinic Judaism was heeded by only a few isolated German theologians and historians. The majority remained captive to their negative conceptions and they more had no interest or desire to



scientific preeminence in the field was recognized, and who broadcast an image of Judaism that was altogether different from that which Protestant or Catholic divinity students should learn.

In the same way that it is hard to imagine Kittel's and Gressmann's perspectives on rabbinic Judaism contributing to the spread of German Volkism and anti-Semitism, it is also hard to see lessons on rabbinic literature, kabbala and Hasidism as a significant expression of pan-German tolerance and openness.

Although this is a little-known, marginal chapter in the history of Jewish studies, it required laborious research by Wassermann in forgotten archives and texts that made it possible to raise the subject up from the dead. Wassermann writes that he undertook this archival crusade not only because of his desire to throw light on a forgotten corner of the history of Jewish studies, but also because he found in this corner a model of academic life, in front of and behind the curtain. He proposes several sarcastic and acerbic diagnoses about how events sometimes unfold, but David Lodge does it better. Nor am I convinced that the shoulders of the "dwarf" scholars that are the heroes of this book, are the correct place from which to gain perspective on the "academy" in general, and the fate of Jewish studies in particular.

I am sorry if I disappoint him, but the contribution of the book lies in its sidelong view of the relations between the German-Christian academic theology and sciences, and Judaism. Although the perspective is from the side, some elements of this relationship may be seen with great clarity.