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Adrian Feuchtwanger

Caught Between Cultures: Lion Feuchtwanger's Flavius Josephus

Lion Feuchtwanger's 1932 novel Der jüdische Krieg portrays Flavius Josephus as a young man caught between the conflicting cultures of Rome and Jerusalem and forced to make difficult choices. The novel also makes an implicit comment on the precarious position of European Jews in the early 1930s. This article outlines the principal elements and themes of the novel, and places it in the context of other German literary works of the period, in particular Hanns Johst's proto-Nazi play Schlageter.

Principal elements of the novel

Over the centuries, Christians and Jews have held conflicting views of Flavius Josephus. The former considered his writings, with their accounts of early Christianity, to be near-canonical; the latter refused to read his histories and remembered him merely as the traitor who defected to the Romans in the First Jewish War—the uprising which led to the fall of Jerusalem, with all its associated symbolism for the Jewish diaspora.¹ Lion Feuchtwanger, as a pacifist, anti-chauvinist commentator writing during the Weimar Republic, took a more agnostic view: in his version of the Josephus story, archetypal Jewish dilemmas are played out, and the novel as a whole makes an indirect comment on the situation of European Jews in 1932.

The reader first encounters Joseph ben Matthias (Josephus's original name) seeking an amnesty for three fellow Judeans unjustly imprisoned by the Romans for stirring up unrest. His efforts backfire, giving Rome an excuse to comprehensively crush the Jewish revolt. Ambitious with an idealistic streak, i.e. a typical Feuchtwanger protagonist, Joseph leads a group of fighters in the War, but is captured; surviving by endearing himself to his new masters, he accompanies the emperor Titus during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., as an observer and peacemaker.

These character-forming events dent Joseph's idealism, but at this point in Feuchtwanger's trilogy he is still young and certainly not an embittered cynic. The central scene enacting this development sees him

¹ See Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works and their Importance* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 15-16

in consultation with his grandfatherly mentor, Johanan ben Zakai. Johanan, a senior member of the judiciary and Rector of the Temple University, condones Joseph's decision to shift his loyalties away from Jerusalem towards Rome. Johanan suggests that the rule of law, and enlightenment as symbolized by the university at Yavne, are more important than dreams of an independent Judea: "Jerusalem und der Tempel waren fallreif vor Ihrer Tat. [...] Das Reich ist nicht das Wichtigste. [...] Nicht Volk und Staat schaffen die Gemeinschaft. Unserer Gemeinschaft Sinn ist nicht das Reich, unserer Gemeinschaft Sinn ist das Gesetz. Solange Lehre und Gesetz dauert, haben wir Zusammenhalt, festeren als durch den Staat. [...] Man kann uns nicht auseinanderreißen, solange wir Zungen haben oder Papier für das Gesetz".²

Joseph is basically willing to accept this vision of a Jewish diaspora, though in his mind it has associations with a kind of heresy: 'Der Glaube dieses grossen Alten war also nichts Strahlendes, was ihm half, sondern etwas Mühevolleres, Listiges, immer verbunden mit Ketzerei, immer sich wehrend gegen Ketzerei, eine Last.'³

At any rate, he inwardly digests the elder's advice⁴ and is soon ready to assume the role of hard-headed advocate of world citizenship, with all its implications: 'Er war der erste Mensch, eine solche Weltanschauung vorzuleben. Er war eine neue Art Mensch, nicht mehr Jude, nicht Grieche, nicht Römer: ein Bürger des ganzen Erdkreises, soweit er gesittet war.'⁵

The dilemma of the world citizen

Loyalty towards one's country is tied to the basic human impulse of protecting one's family, community, and assets, and therefore comes from deep recesses in the mind. In ruminating on the subject, the contemporary historian Eric Hobsbawm has remarked:

First, official ideologies of states and movements are not guides to what is in the minds of even the most loyal citizens or supporters. Second, and more specifically, we cannot assume that for most people national identification – when it exists – excludes or is always or ever superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. In fact, it is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them. Thirdly, national identification and what it is believed to imply, can change and shift in time, even in the course of quite short periods.⁶

² Lion Feuchtwanger, *Der jüdische Krieg* (Rudolstadt: Greifenverlag, 1951), 234-5. The emphasis on the rule of law is a particularly pointed statement in the context of Germany in 1932.

³ Feuchtwanger, 236.

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of the trilogy's constellation of characters, see Andrea Bunzel, *La Trilogie de Joseph de Lion Feuchtwanger, Histoire et écriture romanesque* (Montpellier: Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, 2006), 55-174

⁵ Bunzel, 268.

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11

It is therefore not surprising that much of *Der jüdische Krieg* is devoted to Joseph/Josephus's conflicting feelings about his former identity as a Judean fighter and his new situation as a Roman citizen writing histories under Roman patronage. He is shown in situations of profound doubt and psychological isolation, including a week-long period of mental and physical collapse. As a result of his defection, he repeatedly undergoes public humiliation, notably when he is driven out of the synagogue of Alexandria – one of the main centres of Hellenistic Judaism – for having presented his 'Psalm des Weltbürgers' in public. There is further ignominy, Biblical in its symbolism and intensity, when he fails to mediate between the Romans and the Judeans during the climactic fall of Jerusalem. When his besieged former countrymen send a pig captured from the Romans to greet him, he becomes the object of ridicule from both camps: 'In diesen Augenblicken, die lang waren wie Jahre, büßte Josef allen Hochmut seines Lebens [...]. Eine große Kälte fiel ihn an, alles war von ihm abgeblättert, Schmerz und Hochmut. Er gehörte nicht zu den Römern und nicht zu den Juden, die Erde war wüst und leer, wie vor der Schöpfung, er war allein, um ihn war nichts als Hohn und Gelächter.'⁷

Implicit meaning for readers in 1932

Joseph's defection carries a clear anti-militarist message, which reflects Lion Feuchtwanger's response to World War I: following his 1914 discharge from the German army on health grounds, Feuchtwanger had published one of Germany's first anti-war poems, 'Lied der Gefallenen (Wir Warten)⁸, had written a play dealing with the sufferings of prisoners of war (*Die Kriegsgefangenen* (1918))⁹, and had aligned himself with pacifists such as politician and activist Ludwig Quidde, the 1927 Nobel Peace Prize winner¹⁰.

At the same time, Joseph's actions mirror Feuchtwanger's mixed feelings about Zionism versus assimilation, and about the complex and precarious position of European Jews in the early 1930s. This was a set of conflicts of which the author had direct personal experience: his brother Berthold was a staunch German patriot who had won the Iron Cross in World War I, while his sisters Henny and Madi were Zionists who had left Germany for Palestine in the mid-1920s¹¹. Feuchtwanger commented on these issues in a 1927 interview with the British periodical *New Judea*: 'Fragt man mich nach meiner Einstellung zum Zionismus, so bin ich etwas verlegen. Ich habe Brüder und Schwestern, die Zionisten sind; ich persönlich aber fürchte mich davor, in ein Fahrwasser zu gelangen, das mich zu einem jüdischen Chauvinismus führen könnte, der nicht besser ist also französischer oder deutscher. Zu jüdischer Kulturarbeit aber fühle ich mich sehr hingezogen. Ich unterstütze den kulturellen Zionismus'.¹²

⁷ Feuchtwanger, 384-5.

⁸ In: *Die Schaubühne*, XI, No. 8 (February 25, 1915), 189.

⁹ In: *Stücke in Prosa*, (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1936).

¹⁰ See Andreas Heusler's biography *Lion Feuchtwanger. Münchner, Emigrant, Weltbürger* (Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 2014), 125.

¹¹ See Edgar Feuchtwanger, *From Weimar to Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 113. Also Edgar Feuchtwanger's memoir, *I Was Hitler's Neighbour* (London: Bretwalda, 2015), 42.

¹² ' In: *Jüdische Rundschau*, 21.12.1927 (Bericht über ein in London geführtes Interview eines Mitarbeiters von 'New Judea' mit Lion Feuchtwanger). See Heusler, 127.

His comments constitute a snapshot of the convoluted situation facing German Jews at that time. They also provide further evidence that for the rationalist Feuchtwanger, the chauvinism he described was a greater evil than harbouring doubts about one's personal and national identity.

Nationalism in German literature of the period

Among the bulk of the German population, meanwhile, there seemed to be few such doubts. Notwithstanding the defeat in World War I and the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, jingoistic nationalism was back in the ascendancy by 1932—the year of Hitler's electoral breakthrough. Nationalist sentiment had long since reasserted itself and found expression in two groups of literary works, those by authors of the so-called Conservative Revolution, and those by writers very obviously aligned with National Socialist objectives even before the start of the Third Reich.

Among the former group, Ernst Jünger was the most notorious, with his mythologization of the warrior spirit in *In Stahlgewittern* (1920); Arnolt Bronnen's *Freikorps* novels such as *O.S.* (1929) were more pragmatic models for militant political action; *Die Geächteten* (1930) by Ernst von Salomon, who served five years in prison for his part in the 1922 assassination of Jewish foreign minister Walter Rathenau, was the most scandalous in its call for violence against the republic and its leading representatives. The extent to which these writers were bellwethers of Nazi nationalist doctrine has been heavily debated, but clearly they all made uncompromising assumptions about the moral rectitude of patriotism.¹³ Among the latter group, one particularly influential work exemplifies pre-fascist thinking with an irrationalist slant: Hanns Johst's *Schlageter* (1933).¹⁴ This play can fruitfully be lined up alongside *Der jüdische Krieg* since, like Feuchtwanger's novel, it explores the psychology of a young man's attitudes towards war and patriotism. Johst raises some of the same questions as Feuchtwanger, but from a proto-Nazi perspective: should a young man's loyalty to his country override all other concerns, or should loyalty to values matter more? What kind of values matter, and in what kind of a nation?

Schlageter is based on the real-life early Nazi party and *Freikorps* member Albert Leo Schlageter. As portrayed in the play, Schlageter is a very reluctant adherent to the status quo in Germany in 1923, and before long is persuaded to go to the Ruhr to sabotage the occupying French troops. He falls into their hands and is subsequently executed.

Golo Mann described the play as 'vicious [and] nasty'¹⁵ and he was right. The older characters do stand up for democracy and the rule of law; however, the posse of self-aggrandizing, Jew-free veterans and

¹³ See Martin Travers, *Critics of Modernity: The Literature of the Conservative Revolution in Germany, 1890-1933* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

¹⁴ Johst's play was just one component of the Nazis' Schlageter myth. For a full account of this Schlageter mythopoeia, see for example Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 13-41.

¹⁵ Golo Mann, *Erinnerungen und Gedanken. Eine Jugend in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1981), 531.

university graduates around Schlageter are conspiracy theorists who long to remilitarize civilian life with little concern for the potential human cost.

In structural terms, the play is conventional, employing dramatic irony to render Schlageter's actions heroic rather than futile, and one can discern a progression of preparation, suspension, and resolution¹⁶. Productions, which included a re-enactment of Schlageter's death by firing squad, were doubtless spirited, forceful affairs,¹⁷ commensurate with Johst's hopes for dramatic "elixir": '[Ein Drama] das die Kraft in sich birgt, die seelische und geistige Kraft, alle Beteiligten dergestalt zu überwältigen, [...] dass dieses Drama sich wie ein Elixier in ihm aufzulösen beginnt. Dass er sich erlebnismäßig überschattet fühlt von der Begegnung mit etwas Metaphysischem, was zu ihm persönlich drängt [...] und ihn nicht ruhen lässt, bis er für das Gesicht, für die Begegnung eine Lösung, seine Erlösung, errungen, gefunden hat'.¹⁸

The play's key strength from the Nazis' perspective (productions were staged at over a thousand venues during the 1933-34 season) arose from the fact that Schlageter's clique are prototypes for the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹⁹ It has often been said that every nation is an imagined community²⁰ – in this case we encounter a sociologically stratified community in which, in accordance with the play's schematic choice of characters, women "know their place" and the minor figures are, as a matter of routine, the target of ridicule from anyone above them in the hierarchy.

Moreover, Schlageter and his group see themselves as revolutionaries of sorts, yet have little interest in the socio-political role apportioned to the young nowadays, namely to liberate themselves from, subvert or question the influence of the older generation. In the play the older generation is represented by the senior army officer and politician characters, who invoke an unreconstructed nineteenth-century military tradition of heroic self-sacrifice.²¹

The play's most infamous line, which in English lives on as the cliché 'When I hear the word "culture", I reach for my gun!' and is often misattributed to Hermann Göring, is an outright rejection of democratic values. It combines the vim of declamatory rhetoric with the braggadocio of misguided youth: 'Brüderlichkeit, Gleichheit ... Freiheit ... Schönheit und Würde! [...] Nein, zehn Schritt vom Leibe mit dem ganzen Weltanschauungssalat ... Hier wird scharf geschossen! Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning!'²²

¹⁶ See Gerwin Strobl, 'Staging the Nazi Assault on Reason: Hanns Johst's *Schlageter* and the 'Theatre of Inner Experience,' *New Theatre Quarterly* 21:4 (November 2005).

¹⁷ See Strobl.

¹⁸ Hanns Johst, 'Vom neuen Drama', in Heinz Kindermann, ed.: *Des deutschen Dichters Sendung in der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1933), 209.

¹⁹ For detailed analysis of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a pillar of Nazi ideology, see for example Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2003).

²⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

²¹ See Rene Schilling, *Kriegshelden. Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1813-1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2002).

²² Hanns Johst, *Schlageter* (Munich: Albert Langen-Georg Müller Verlag, 1933), 26.

As critics have noted,²³ Johst makes no attempt to provide rational motives which might account for Schlageter's actions. Instead, to give the drama its undeniable vitality, he relies on the choice of material, which is 'perfect for Nazi purposes: laden with drama, sacrifice and heartrending sentiment – a classic irrational act.'²⁴ He also imbues his young characters with enormous energy: their mashed-up idiolect of religious metaphor and convulsive Expressionist outburst creates an atmosphere of heady excitement and *Vaterlandsmystizismus*.

Josephus: rational approach to issues of national concern

By welcome comparison, Feuchtwanger's protagonist – an independent thinker and self-starter driven by cerebral, complex motives – favours a much more considered, less narrow-mindedly chauvinistic approach to his country's situation. In the early chapters of *Der jüdische Krieg*, he devotes his energies to diplomacy and political efforts to obtain the amnesty which he hopes will, by implication, create national cohesion through the collective memory of suffering. When the outcome is unfavourable, he is willing to admit his actions were misguided.

As Joseph/Josephus sees it, issues of national concern should be debated in a balanced fashion. Feuchtwanger therefore uses Justus of Tiberias, a rival Jewish politician and thinker, as a counter-figure who presents opposing points of view about Judea's relationship with Rome. By portraying Justus as the main character's alter ego,²⁵ Feuchtwanger invites the reader to consider different perspectives on key questions such as loyalty to country versus pragmatism, and idealism versus political reality.

Warning to future generations

Once Joseph has made the decision to acquire Roman citizenship and take the name Josephus, he acts and thinks in a spirit of rationalist pragmatism. Under Roman patronage, he nurtures his predisposition towards the pursuit of both Roman and Jewish history and, in common with other Feuchtwanger protagonists, cultivates a belief in human progress. He also discovers a propensity for educating the young, represented in the novel by his assistant Cornelius, to whom he dictates the opening lines of his account of the Jewish War: "Es werden wahrscheinlich mehrere versuchen, den Krieg der Juden gegen die Römer zu beschreiben, Autoren, die nicht Zeugen der Ereignisse waren, und die angewiesen sind auf törichtes, widerspruchsvolles Gerede. Ich, Josef, des Matthias Sohn, Priester der Ersten Reihe aus

²³ See Strobl.

²⁴ Gilmer W. Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich: A Study of Race and History in Nazi Textbooks* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 44.

²⁵ See Bunzel, 74: '[...] Juste, dans le premier tome détenait un rôle bien déterminé, celui de l'*alter ego* de Joseph, celui de la *raison* ayant la réponse ultime à tout [...]'].

Jerusalem, habe mich entschlossen, die Geschichte dieses Krieges zu schreiben, wie er wirklich war, den Heutigen zur Erinnerung, den Späteren zur Warnung."²⁶

Josephus's thinking here is congruent with Feuchtwanger's: as well as being a personal mission statement, this declaration is a lapidary warning to future generations about the dangers of unbridled nationalism—a warning which needless to say was not heeded by German voters in 1932.

Feuchtwanger restated the warning in the essay 'Nationalismus und Judentum', which was published in 1933 as a postscript to the novel and turned out to be uncannily prophetic: 'Was die Mehrzahl der Weisshäutigen erst aus dem Weltkrieg gelernt hat oder vielleicht erst aus einem zweiten Weltkrieg wird lernen müssen – nämlich die Sinnlosigkeit eines regional-politischen Nationalismus – das ist uns Juden vor achtzehnhundert Jahren auf eine sehr bittere, unvergessliche Weise eingehämmert worden.'²⁷ The Jews, Feuchtwanger argued, had already learned the follies of nationalism many centuries before, while the Germans' salutary lesson was yet to come²⁸.

²⁶ Feuchtwanger, 463.

²⁷ Lion Feuchtwanger, 'Nationalismus und Judentum' (1933), in Wolfgang Berndt, ed., *Centum Opuscula, Eine Auswahl* (Rudolstadt: Greifenverlag, 1956), 480-481. See also Volker Skierka, 'Lion Feuchtwanger—Ein deutsches Schriftstellerleben, Der unheimliche Prophet', 1. Vortrag vor dem Evangelischen Forum Münster e.V. Münster, 8th May 2012 (text available from author); and Wulf Köpke, 'Lion Feuchtwangers *Josephus*: Eine Selbstbefragung in der Krise des Exils', in Frank Stern, ed.: *Feuchtwanger und Exil, Glaube und Kultur 1933-1945. "Der Tag wird kommen"* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 1-23.

²⁸ Lion Feuchtwanger moderated his anti-militarist position in the mid-1930s when faced with the challenge of National Socialism and imminent war (see Adrian Feuchtwanger, 'Russia's Mythic Attraction: Lion Feuchtwanger in Moscow, 1937', *Germano-Slavica* 8 (1993) [[http://www.feuchtwanger.com/Germano-Slavica%20\(Academic%20Journal,%20Comparative%20Literature\).pdf](http://www.feuchtwanger.com/Germano-Slavica%20(Academic%20Journal,%20Comparative%20Literature).pdf)]

List of Names Mentioned in the Essay

Joseph ben Matthias

Flavius Josephus

Johanan ben Zakai

Eric Hobsbawm

Ernst Jünger

Arnolt Bronnen

Ernst von Salomon

Walter Rathenau

Hanns Johst

Albert Leo Schlageter

Golo Mann

Hermann Göring

Justus of Tiberias

Abstract

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Lion Feuchtwanger's 1932 novel *Der jüdische Krieg* portrays Flavius Josephus as a young man caught between the conflicting cultures of Rome and Jerusalem and forced to make difficult choices. The novel also makes an implicit comment on the precarious position of European Jews in the early 1930s. This article outlines the principal elements and themes of the novel, and places it in the context of other German literary works of the period, in particular Hanns Johst's proto-Nazi play *Schlageter*.