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**A Post-nationalist Weimar Novel? A Third-generation View of *Der jüdische Krieg* (1932)**

**Summary**

*A contemporary reading of Lion Feuchtwanger's 1932 novel confirms that in early 1930s Germany, post-nationalism—while inherently problematic in any era—was one of the few acceptable alternatives to the toxic brand of nationalism dominating culture and politics.*

**Principal elements of the novel**

Over the centuries Christians and Jews have held conflicting views of Flavius Josephus. The former considered his writings near-canonical, by virtue of their accounts of early Christianity; the latter took a rather tougher line, refusing to read or refer to Josephus's histories and holding the man himself in disregard as the renegade who sided with 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).<sup>1</sup>

Lion Feuchtwanger, as a 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal intellectual, took a more agnostic view. His account of Josephus therefore largely sticks to the facts. The reader first encounters Joseph Ben Matthias 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, as an observer and peacemaker.

These character-forming events dent Joseph's idealism, but at this point in the trilogy he is still young and certainly no embittered cynic. The central scene enacting this development sees him in consultation with his grandfatherly mentor, Jochanan Ben Sakkai. Jochanan, a senior member of the judiciary and Rector

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

of the Temple University, condones Joseph's decision to align himself with Rome. He suggests that the rule of law, and enlightenment as symbolized by the university at Jabne, 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."<sup>2</sup>

Joseph is basically willing to accept this vision of a post-diaspora Judea, 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."<sup>3</sup>

At any rate, he inwardly digests the elder's advice<sup>4</sup> and is soon ready to assume the role of hard-headed advocate of what is nowadays known as post-nationalism, with all its implications:

"Er war der erste Mensch, eine solche Weltanschauung vorzuleben. Er war eine neue Art Mensch, nicht mehr Jude, nicht Griechen, nicht Römer: ein Bürger des ganzen Erdkreises, soweit er gesittet war."<sup>5</sup>

### The post-nationalist dilemma

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."<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, much of *Der jüdische Krieg* is devoted to Josephus's feelings about his position between Rome and Judea. Josephus is shown in scenes of psychological isolation, including a week-long period of mental and physical collapse. Humiliating episodes abound, 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. Further ignominy, Biblical in its symbolism and intensity, comes on the heels of his

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<sup>2</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Der jüdische Krieg*, Greifenverlag, Rudolstadt (1951), p. 234-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>4</sup> 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*, Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (2006), pp. 55-174

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.268.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*. Cambridge University Press, Second Edition (1992), p. 11

failure to mediate between the two sides during the climactic fall of Jerusalem. Starving, besieged former countrymen send a pig captured from the Romans to greet him, prompting 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."<sup>7</sup>

The post-nationalist position is, Feuchtwanger confirms, somewhere between a rock and a hard place: the pressure from the hawks is ferocious, and survivor's guilt comes with the territory.

### Nationalism in early 1930s literature

Pressures of this nature were presumably ubiquitous in early 1930s Germany, to judge by 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 1933.

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<sup>8</sup>.

Among the latter group, one particularly influential work exemplifies pre-fascist thinking with an irrationalist slant: Hanns Johst's *Schlageter*.<sup>9</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 384-5.

<sup>8</sup> See Martin Travers, *Critics of Modernity: The Literature of the Conservative Revolution in Germany, 1890-1933*, Peter Lang, New York (2001).

<sup>9</sup> 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*, Indiana University Press (1992), pp 13-41.

Golo Mann described the play as "vicious [and] nasty"<sup>10</sup> 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 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 resolution<sup>11</sup>. Productions, which included a re-enactment of Schlageter's death by firing squad, were doubtless spirited, forceful affairs<sup>12</sup>, in accordance 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."<sup>13</sup>

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*.<sup>14</sup> It has often been said that every nation is an imagined community<sup>15</sup>—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 19<sup>th</sup>-century military tradition of heroic self-sacrifice.<sup>16</sup>

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 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

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<sup>10</sup> Golo Mann, *Erinnerungen und Gedanken. Eine Jugend in Deutschland*. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt (1981), p. 531.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> See Strobl.

<sup>13</sup> Hanns Johst, 'Vom neuen Drama', in: Heinz Kindermann (ed.): *Des deutschen Dichters Sendung in der Gegenwart*, Reclam, Leipzig (1933), p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> For detailed analysis of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a pillar of Nazi ideology, see for example Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, Penguin/Allen Lane, London (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London (1991).

<sup>16</sup> See Rene Schilling, *Kriegshelden. Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1813-1945*, Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn (2002).

Weltanschauungssalat ... Hier wird scharf geschossen! Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meinen Browning!"<sup>17</sup>

As critics have noted<sup>18</sup>, 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."<sup>19</sup> 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 Josephus—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 Josephus sees it, issues of national concern should be debated in a balanced fashion. Feuchtwanger therefore employs Josephus and Justus of Tiberias, a rival Jewish politician and thinker, as a character pair who discuss Judea's relationship with Rome from opposing standpoints: by presenting Justus as Josephus's alter ego<sup>20</sup>, Feuchtwanger invites the reader to consider different perspectives on key questions such as loyalty to country versus pragmatism or idealism versus political reality.

### **Warning to future generations**

Josephus's decision to take Roman citizenship reflects the novel's emphasis on rationalist pragmatism. Once under Roman patronage, Josephus nurtures his predisposition towards the pursuit of historical truth 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 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

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<sup>17</sup> Hanns Johst, *Schlageter*, Albert Langen-Georg Müller Verlag, Munich (1933), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> See Strobl.

<sup>19</sup> Gilmer W. Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich: A Study of Race and History in Nazi Textbooks*, SUNY Press, Albany (1985), p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> See Bunzel, p. 74: [...] Juste, dans le premier tome détentait un rôle bien déterminé, celui de l'*alter ego* de Joseph, celui de la *raison* ayant la réponse ultime à tout [...].

Gerede. Ich, Josef, des Matthias Sohn, Priester der Ersten Reihe aus Jerusalem, habe mich entschlossen, die Geschichte dieses Krieges zu schreiben, wie er wirklich war, den Heutigen zur Erinnerung, den Späteren zur Warnung."<sup>21</sup>

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. Ultimately, of course, those future generations were to include the Germans of the early 1930s.

Feuchtwanger restated the warning even more clearly in the essay 'Nationalismus und Judentum', published in 1933 as an accurately prophetic postscript to the novel:

"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."<sup>22</sup>

It was a warning which, needless to say, went unheeded by the Germans.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 463.

<sup>22</sup> 'Nationalismus und Judentum' (1933), in: *Centum Opuscula, Eine Auswahl*, ed. Wolfgang Berndt, Greifenverlag, Rudolstadt (1956), pp.480-481. See also Volker Skierka, 'Lion Feuchtwanger—Ein deutsches Schriftstellerleben, Der unheimliche Prophet', 1. Vortrag vor dem Evangelischen Forum Münster e.V. Münster, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012 (text available from author); and Wulf Köpke, 'Lion Feuchtwangers *Josephus*: Eine Selbstbefragung in der Krise des Exils', in: *Feuchtwanger und Exil, Glaube und Kultur 1933-1945. "Der Tag wird kommen"*, ed. Frank Stern [Papers presented at the International Feuchtwanger Society Conference 2009, Vienna], Peter Lang, Bern (2011).