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Die Geschwister Oppermann: A German Jewish Family in Extremis

By Adrian Feuchtwanger

"Die wirkungsvollste, meistgelesene erzählerische Darstellung der deutschen Kalamität."¹ Klaus Mann²

The novel in historical context

Die Geschwister Oppermann was the first novel by a major international author to provide readers outside Germany with a full account of conditions inside the Third Reich. In a 20th May 1934 review in the *Houston Post*, Oveta Culp Hobby—who after the war served in Eisenhower's cabinet as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare—wrote:³

The announcement of the publication of this book caused no little excitement and surmise. Since the beginning of the Nazi reign of terror, sober minded and reflective people have awaited a sane account of an insane debauch. It matters not what your approach to the book is — whether you are a royalist, communist or a nationalist or perhaps you are a liberal — one able to see justice as an abstract quality disassociated with nationality, religion and business methods — you must admit the Nazis' betrayal of civilisation.⁴

¹ The reference is to the original 1933 Querido Verlag (Amsterdam) edition. The dust jacket bore the following words of praise from the London *Spectator*: 'A passionate and stimulating book aimed at shaking up anyone still indifferent to events in Germany.'

² Klaus Mann, *Der Wendepunkt* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1953), 339.

³ 'Review of *The Oppermanns* (Viking Press, New York)', by Oveta Culp Hobby, *Houston Post*, 20th May 1934. Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC. Reviews of the novel also appeared in more than a dozen other major US newspapers.

⁴ For a full account of how foreign correspondents such as William Shirer, Dorothy Thompson, Pulitzer Prize-winner Edgar Maurer and other members of the foreign press corps reported the events in Germany, see Andrew Nagorski, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).



The principal Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, had earlier issued a public denunciation of Lion Feuchtwanger and the novel:

'Der jüdischer Hetzapostel Lion Feuchtwanger hat eine Greuelnovelle in England herausgegeben, worin die fürchterlichsten Schandtaten gegen seine jüdischen Romanfiguren geschildert werden. Die Linkspresse versucht natürlich dafür Reklame zu machen, jedoch betont die Mehrheit der Presse, dass Feuchtwanger *niemals während der Hitlerregierung in Deutschland gewesen ist* und die Schilderungen seines Romans daher kein richtiges Bild geben können.⁵



Personal attacks of this kind in the Nazi press did nothing to slow international sales of the novel, however: within nine months of its publication in late 1933, it had sold 257,000 copies in 15 languages.⁶

To stay or to go?

Die Geschwister Oppermann tells the story of an assimilated Jewish middle-class family who must decide whether to stay in Germany or emigrate. It portrays "der Wiedereinbruch der Barbarei in Deutschland und ihr zeitweiliger Sieg über die Vernunft",⁷ and provides a description, which the historical record shows to be largely accurate, of many of the dramatic changes occurring in the worlds of politics, law, medicine, commerce, and education. In *Erfolg*, Lion Feuchtwanger had fictionalized real-life figures from German political and intellectual life, to the extent that the 1930 novel is a fully-fledged roman-à-clef; in *Die*

⁵ *Völkischer Beobachter*, 4th December 1933. Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC.

⁶ Source: Malcom Humble and Ray Furness, *Introduction to German Literature, 1871-1990* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 97.

⁷ Lion Feuchtwanger, *Exil, Nachwort des Autors 1939* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 787.

Geschwister Oppermann he uses the technique in a more limited way: the National Socialists are 'die Völkischen', and Gustav Oppermann is loosely based on his brother, the publisher Ludwig Feuchtwanger.

The similarities between Ludwig Feuchtwanger and Gustav Oppermann are too striking to ignore, and while it is worth noting that Lion Feuchtwanger's recent biographer Andreas Heusler⁸ and earlier critics consider the Gustav Oppermann figure to be autobiographical, that assumption is wide of the mark, since someone with as high a profile as Lion Feuchtwanger would not have thought it remotely possible to stay on in Germany after January 30th 1933.

At any rate, by tracing the similarities between the real and the fictional figure one can gain valuable insight into the novel. Gustav Oppermann, in one of the novel's intertwining plot lines, is a man of letters and polymath who thrives on intellectual discourse, and maintains an extensive network of friends and associates among fellow members of the intelligentsia. Understandably, he is reluctant to leave the country in which his family has lived for generations, and deludes himself about what life under National Socialism will be like.

Ludwig Feuchtwanger⁹ deluded himself in a similar manner, unfortunately. In an 11th November 1933 letter he wrote to the prominent legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt—one of his authors at Duncker & Humblot and hitherto a personal friend—that on his own initiative he had stepped down as director, but nonetheless expressed hope that, despite new legislation barring Jews from positions in fields such as publishing, higher education and law, he would be able to maintain a loose working relationship with Duncker & Humblot, where he had worked for 20 years:

So blieb ich hier statt als Bohème-Emigrant ein Leben irgendwo ausserhalb Deutschlands zu führen. Ich komme auch reibungslos aus; eine "Tarnung" kommt ja in meinem Fall nicht in Frage. Wieweit einem die Dinge ins Herz schneiden, steht auf einem anderen Blatt. [...] Ich meine auch, dass die Zeit jetzt näher rückt, ihnen [den deutschen Juden] einen Status zu geben und von dem Katz- u. Maus-Spiel zu lassen. Dies könnte jetzt mit ganz sicheren Linien ausschließlich vom nat.-soz. Status großzügig und eindeutig in vorbildlicher Weise geschehen. Ein Reichskommissar mit einem absolut zuverlässigen jüdischen Experten und Mittelsmann ist vor dieser Regelung und als Träger der Regelung nötig.¹⁰



⁸ Andreas Heusler, *Lion Feuchtwanger, Münchner—Emigrant—Weltbürger* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2014), 216.

⁹ See https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_Feuchtwanger. See also Ludwig Feuchtwanger (ed. Rolf Riess), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur jüdischen Geschichte*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2003).

¹⁰ Ludwig Feuchtwanger's 11th November 1933 letter to Carl Schmitt, during the final few months of their friendship and correspondence. In: Rolf Riess, ed.: *Carl Schmitt—Ludwig Feuchtwanger Briefwechsel 1918-1935*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007), 394-5

Gustav Oppermann harbours similar illusions, as is evident from the following speech to the board of Möbelhaus Oppermann:

"Was stellen Sie sich denn vor? Was fürchten Sie denn? Glauben Sie, man wird unsere Läden zusperren? Glauben Sie, man wird unser Betriebskapital enteignen? Weil wir Juden sind? [...] Lassen Sie mich doch mit Ihren Ammenmärchen in Frieden. Pogrome gibt's nicht mehr in Deutschland. Damit ist es zu Ende. Seit mehr als hundert Jahren. Seit hundertvierzehn Jahren, wenn Sie's genau wissen wollen. Glauben Sie, dieses ganze Volk von fünfundsechzig Millionen Menschen hat aufgehört, ein Kulturvolk zu sein, weil es ein paar Narren und Lumpen Redefreiheit gab?" [...] Die andern sassen betreten. [...] Wie konnte ein so gescheiter Mensch wie Gustav so blind sein? Da sieht man es, wohin die Beschäftigung mit literarischen und philosophischen Dingen führt.¹¹

Gustav Oppermann's siblings can see far more clearly than he that the situation is likely to deteriorate, and are well aware of the significance of the exodus of tens of thousands of fellow Jews¹² and the boycotting of Jewish-owned shops and businesses.

Gustav Oppermann eventually does leave Germany, but upon meeting up with his nephew Heinrich Lavendel in Zurich he agonises over whether to return to his homeland and engage in agitation against the regime. Is it more prudent to live for an idea than to die for it?¹³ He chooses to cross the border back into Bavaria, is soon arrested and incarcerated in Moosach concentration camp (Dachau), and dies a few weeks later from the resulting injuries and maltreatment.

This may have been the experience for some returning Jews who went back and were arrested, but the reality as experienced by Ludwig Feuchtwanger was somewhat different. For those German Jewish intellectuals who stayed on in Germany, the scope for action of any sort against the regime was already by that time severely limited. Ludwig Feuchtwanger "found a niche in that late renaissance of German-Jewish culture, forced into ghettoization by the diktat of Goebbels, that has been called a flowering in the face of death".¹⁴ He was able to find full-time employment with the Jewish community in Munich as director of the *Lehrhaus*, wrote widely in the Jewish press, and travelled all over Germany to give lectures.¹⁵ In common with Gustav Oppermann he found comfort in his deepening relationship with his

¹¹Lion Feuchtwanger, *Gesammelte Werke, Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 3. Auflage (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1988), 128.

¹² Amos Elon gives a powerful account of the departure of 100,000 Jews from Germany between 1933 and 1935 in: *The Pity of It All, A Portrait of Jews in Germany 1743-1933* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 397-401.

¹³ *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 342, "[Es ist] klüger, für eine Idee zu leben statt für sie zu sterben", states Gustav Oppermann's nephew Heinrich, in a discussion about the scope for isolated agitation against the regime.

¹⁴ Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Einleitung*, in: Rolf Riess, ed.: *Carl Schmitt-Ludwig Feuchtwanger Briefwechsel 1918-1935*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2007), 10. See also Edgar Feuchtwanger, 'Zerreißprobe', in Geoffrey Davis, ed., *Feuchtwanger und Berlin* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 267-275.

¹⁵Preface by Edgar Feuchtwanger, in: Ludwig Feuchtwanger (ed. Reinhard Mehring and Rolf Riess), *Der Gang der Juden durch die Weltgeschichte, Erstveröffentlichung eines Manuskriptes von 1938*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), VII. See also Ludwig Feuchtwanger (ed. Reinhard Mehring and Rolf Riess), *Auf der Suche nach dem Wesen des Judentums, Beiträge zur Grundlegung der jüdischen Weltgeschichte* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011).

Jewish heritage.¹⁶ However, as the brother of one of the Nazis' leading public enemies he was already in a dangerous position, and certainly could not risk writing anything overtly critical of the regime. Immediately after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 he was incarcerated in Dachau as a so-called *Schutzhaftjude*. The fact that during his six weeks there the camp authorities did not put two and two together is astonishing, and suggests that the camp was not organized with great efficiency.¹⁷



School life in a one-party state

In another plot line, which is particularly effective in conveying the sufferings of German Jews as Nazism took hold, the precocious teenager Berthold Oppermann is under ideologically-motivated duress from his history teacher Dr. Bernd Vogelsang, an ardent Nazi. They disagree over historical interpretations of the *Hermannschlacht* in the 1st century AD, the famous battle which led to the Romans' retreat from Germanic territories east of the Rhine: while the teacher sees the battle as affirmation of Germany's military strength and special destiny in world history, the pupil takes a more relativist view. A prolonged dispute between the two ensues, and as a result of Vogelsang's manipulations is brought to the attention of the entire school and a Berlin newspaper aligned with the regime. Sensing that a wedge is being deliberately driven between him and the non-Jewish people around him, the boy takes a fatal overdose.

Throughout the novel, various literary devices are used to convey a sense of growing anxiety. The division of the text into three sections—'Gestern, Heute, Morgen'—suggests that time has slowed; and at several points the exact time is stated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* over-precision ('Um elf Uhr zwanzig [...]; Um elf Uhr sechsvierzig [...]; Um zwölf Uhr acht [...]').¹⁸ This sense of anxiety reaches its culmination at the time of Berthold's overdose, where the passage describing the moments before death occupies an entire page.

¹⁶ *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 307 (the family comes together to celebrate Passover).

¹⁷ Postcard from Dachau concentration camp, from Ludwig Feuchtwanger to his wife Erna and son Edgar, 24th November 1938. After Ludwig Feuchtwanger's release from Dachau, he, his wife Erna and son Edgar emigrated to England in early 1939. "The arrest of large numbers of Jewish men after Kristallnacht was aimed at getting them and their families to leave Germany as soon as possible. If that was the aim, in our case it hit its target. [...] What worked for us were the efforts made by my mother's elder brother, the lawyer Heinrich Rheinstrom, who had once been on the board of 40 German companies and was now established in Paris. He had been instrumental in getting the Austrian Rothschilds out after the Anschluss. He mobilised our other brothers and sisters, including my Uncle Lion, to stump up enough money to get us a British visa. Such a family visa, called a capitalist visa, required a deposit of £1000 in London, so that the family would not become a charge on the British taxpayer. It was a large sum in those days and there were probably not that many German Jews who had relations abroad sufficiently affluent to produce that kind of money." Edgar Feuchtwanger, *I Was Hitler's Neighbour* (London: Bretwalda, 2015), 56-58. See also https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Rheinstrom

¹⁸ *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 23; 67.

Jewish schoolchildren undoubtedly did face additional pressures under the new dictatorship, and this is confirmed in the memoirs of Ludwig Feuchtwanger's son Edgar Feuchtwanger. Like Berthold Oppermann, as a pupil at elementary school in 1933 Edgar Feuchtwanger was forced to swallow the official Nazi version of history as taught by a fervent nationalist, which "one could regard as being thrown in at the deep end as far as Nazism was concerned":¹⁹



In a single-party state and with *Gleichschaltung* there was no longer any multiplicity of influence, there was just one source. My non-Jewish classmates didn't perceive any ideological thrust behind the *Jungvolk*, up to a point they enjoyed it, or didn't enjoy it, as a source of exercise, and it wouldn't have occurred to them to question it. Nonetheless, the goal was to get a grip on society from youth to old age and my classmates were considerably shaped by it. Hitler's growing successes in the mid-Thirties, in particular the reintroduction of conscription in 1935 and remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, shaped the prevailing mood. In a sense the Nazi mobilization of young people was a kind of imitation of what was perceived to be happening in Soviet Russia with the *Komsomol*, though of course with a completely different thrust."²⁰

In the novel, it is this incursion of the militarist totalitarian state into school life, at the expense of the Enlightenment tradition, that is largely to blame for Berthold Oppermann's state of desperation.²¹ That

¹⁹ *Was Hitler's Neighbour*, 43

²⁰ Interview with Edgar Feuchtwanger, 11th December 2016. See also Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Erlebnis und Geschichte, Als Kind in Hitlers Deutschland — Ein Leben in England* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2010); and Edgar Feuchtwanger with Bertil Scali, *Als Hitler unser Nachbar war, Erinnerungen an meine Kindheit im Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2014).

²¹ The treatment of this theme in the novel is corroborated in the memoirs of *Literaturpapst* Marcel Reich-Ranicki. In his account of life as a Jewish pupil at a Berlin *Gymnasium* in the mid-1930s, Reich-Ranicki recalls that while some of his teachers were zealous Nazis, others merely held strongly nationalist views, while others were liberals who

theme plays out throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, in the interactions between Vogelsang, the headmaster Alfred François—a mild-mannered rationalist who keeps a bust of Voltaire in his office—and the teenager:

Das Philharmonische Orchester war Deutschland. [...] Aber, leider, auch das Nationalsozialistische Liederbuch war Deutschland und das Pack in den braunen Uniformen. Soll wirklich dieser Unsinn das andere fressen? Will man wirklich die Irrenhäuser regieren lassen, statt sie einzusperren? Deutschland, mein Deutschland. Es packte ihn plötzlich. Er hatte gelernt, sich zu beherrschen, er hielt auch diesmal an sich. Aber blass und rot wurde er doch, [...].²²

Diaspora

In further plot lines, Professor Edgar Oppermann, a leading laryngologist with a research position at the University of Berlin, is expelled from his clinic on the day of a Jewish boycott and chooses to emigrate to Paris. Martin Oppermann, who runs the Oppermann furniture business, emigrates to London after the non-Jewish competitor Heinrich Wels succeeds in bringing the company to its knees through various chicaneries, against a backdrop of anti-Jewish campaigns, boycotts, and "collective measures" taking place across Germany.²³

To convey the sense that the family has departed to all four points of the compass²⁴, the novel again uses a *Neue Sachlichkeit* technique: a juxtaposition of documents and letters sent from different locations, set forth with sober precision. The resulting tone is of stoical resignation rather than indignation at the injustices suffered:

Das erste Stück war ein Bericht Gustav Oppermanns über seine Erlebnisse in Deutschland. Der Bericht, siebenunddreißig engbeschriebene Maschinenseiten, enthielt detaillierte Angaben über Gewalttätigkeiten, die die völkischen Landsknechte in schwäbischen Gegenden begangen hatten, sowie eine genaue Schilderung des Konzentrationslagers Moosach. Jedes Werturteil war sorgfältig

were highly skeptical of Nazi doctrine but nonetheless had to toe the line. He also recalls that the pupils did not by any means automatically give credence to the versions of history which were thrust upon them. In *The Author of Himself, The Life of Marcel Reich-Ranicki*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), 44-53.

²² *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 153.

²³ See Franziska Schott, 'Die Ausschaltung der Juden aus dem Münchner Wirtschaftsleben, Antijüdische Aktionen nach der Machtergreifung', in Angelika Baumann, ed., *Jüdisches Leben in München*, (Munich: Buchendorfer Verlag, 1995), 150-153. See also Konrad O. Bernheimer, *Narwalzahn und Alte Meister, Aus dem Leben einer Kunsthändlerdynastie* (Hamburg: Hofmann und Campe, 2013); and Paul Lerner, *The Consuming Temple: Jews, Department Stores, and The Consumer Revolution in Germany, 1880-1940* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

²⁴ Lion Feuchtwanger's other siblings in due course emigrated to Palestine or across the Atlantic, or had already done so; however, his sister Bella, a journalist who worked in the publishing business of her brother Martin Feuchtwanger, gained a false sense of security by entering into a marriage of convenience with a Czech rabbi and moving to Prague in the mid-1930s. In the early 1940s she was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp, where she died in 1943. See also Roland Jaeger, 'Martin Feuchtwanger und sein Exilverlag >Edition Olympia< in Tel Aviv', *Aus dem Antiquariat* 2/2016.

vermieden. Das zweite Stück war eine Postkarte. Der Text lautete: "Es ist uns aufgetragen, am Werke zu arbeiten, aber es ist uns nicht gegeben, es zu vollenden." Unterzeichnet war die Karte: "Gustav Oppermann, Wrack." Die ursprüngliche Adresse "Gustav Oppermann" war durchstrichen und von Gustav Oppermann handschriftlich geändert worden in "Heinrich Lavendel". [...].²⁵

This feeling of stoical resignation is mirrored in Lion Feuchtwanger's 25th March 1933 letter to Arnold Zweig, written from Switzerland:²⁶ 'Es war zu spät für mich, in Deutschland noch irgend etwas zu retten. So muss ich wohl alles, was dort war, verloren geben. Mir ist es vor allem leid um das Haus und die Bücher, viel mehr als um das Geld. Marta ist es leid um den Garten.'²⁷

Notwithstanding these private feelings of forbearance, Lion Feuchtwanger acted without delay and completed *Die Geschwister Oppermann* within a few months in mid-1933. Despite being outside Germany, as the *Völkischer Beobachter* pointed out, he was able to immediately provide an accurate account of the situation facing German Jews by relying on media reports, written correspondence, and knowledge of his own family's circumstances. It is clear from a companion piece written in Switzerland, which appeared in the London *Evening Standard* on 22nd March 1933, that his role henceforward would not be to attempt to report from inside Germany—and thereby risk his own immediate arrest and torture, and a similar fate for his siblings there—but rather to use his international reputation as a means to sound the alarm abroad. In the article, pointedly entitled 'I Warn the Jew Baiters', he wrote:

I am not talking of such incidents as the driving of Jewish doctors out of the clinics by Government order, of the fact that Jewish lawyers and judges are not allowed to carry out their duties, that a large number of SA men have been driving about in motorcars taken away from Jews on the grounds that it was provocative for Jews to drive in cars. It is far worse to think that we shall never know how many people have been killed in these days simply because they look like Jews or bore Jewish names, or how many have been shot "while trying to escape".²⁸

Die Geschwister Oppermann was written as an act of resistance to these developments in Germany, and is an important and compelling work which won plaudits from reviewers and fellow authors at the time, and has been well received by critics and biographers since for its lucid portrayal of the early days of the Third Reich.

²⁵ *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, 366.

²⁶ *Lion Feuchtwanger—Arnold Zweig Briefwechsel 1933-1958*, Band I, ed. Harold von Hofe, (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag 1984), 22.

²⁷ Further information about the works cited in this paper is available at www.lionfeuchtwanger.de and www.feuchtwanger.com/Family.html. The author of this paper, Adrian Feuchtwanger, is the son of Edgar Feuchtwanger.

²⁸ 'I Warn the Jew Baiters', *Evening Standard* (London), 22nd March 1933. Feuchtwanger Memorial Library, USC.

