

The Feuchtwangers and Britain
From Weimar to Hope - Exile from the Interwar to the Postwar Period
INTERNATIONAL FEUCHTWANGER SOCIETY 11TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
Leo Baeck Institute London, September 12th-14th, 2024

For publication in *Feuchtwanger Studies 10* (Bern: Peter Lang, September 2026)

ABSTRACT

Why Read *The Oppermanns* Today?
An Introduction for English-speaking Students and Readers

By Adrian Feuchtwanger

This article first gives an overview of so-called “voluntary” Aryanisation of small and medium-sized Jewish businesses at the start of the Third Reich. This is followed by analysis of how that initial phase of Aryanisation policy is portrayed in the main storyline in The Oppermanns. To provide illustration, the expropriation of assets of Feuchtwanger family members is then discussed. For English-speaking students and readers, there is much to be gained from comparing the facts of “voluntary” Aryanisation with the fictional account in The Oppermanns, as the novel can be used as a starting point for discussion of some of the ethical and socio-political aspects of Nazi profiteering in general.

Note: as indicated in Footnote 23, the images can be viewed at <<https://www.feuchtwanger.com/FS10imgs.pptx>>. This is a workaround solution, as we have found in the past that Peter Lang has not been able to include a full set of images in the finalised volume.

Why Read *The Oppermanns* Today?

An Introduction for English-speaking Students and Readers

By Adrian Feuchtwanger

Purpose and structure of this paper

This article first gives an overview of so-called “voluntary” Aryanisation of small and medium-sized Jewish businesses at the start of the Third Reich. This is followed by analysis of how that initial phase of Aryanisation policy is portrayed in the main storyline in *The Oppermanns*. To provide illustration, the expropriation of assets of Feuchtwanger family members is then discussed.

For English-speaking students and readers, there is much to be gained from comparing the facts of “voluntary” Aryanisation with the fictional account in *The Oppermanns*, as the novel can be used as a starting point for discussion of some of the ethical and socio-political aspects of Nazi profiteering in general. For example, students can be encouraged to reflect on questions such as: what did the Nazis mean by “the Aryan race”, and where did their ideas come from? What impact did Nazi Aryanisation policy have on Jewish small and medium-sized businesses at the start of the Third Reich, not only on tangible business assets but also on the mindset of Jewish owners? Students might also wish to discuss philosophical questions about the nature of greed and human weakness into which the Hitler movement tapped so successfully.

Reading *The Oppermanns* can help students and general readers understand some of the pressures faced by medium-sized Jewish-owned businesses, and more broadly by Jewish families in general, at the start of the Third Reich, as the novel also portrays the increasing oppression of and violence towards Jews in Germany in the weeks and months after 30 January 1933. At the time, the novel was written as an act of resistance to those developments; today it is a valuable educational resource that provides insight into the period, since it movingly captures the sad ending of a period of successful German Jewish assimilation, while giving a thought-provoking portrayal of Nazi profiteering. It is an important and compelling work which won plaudits from reviewers in the international press at the time¹, and it has been well received ever since by literature specialists and historians alike.

Brief timeline of the background to “voluntary” Aryanisation

The first few weeks after 30 January 1933 saw the beginnings of *Gleichschaltung*, the Nazification of organisations and structures in German society under a series of laws that eliminated important democratic checks and balances. In particular, the Enabling Act of 23 March 1933 gave Hitler as Chancellor and his cabinet the authority to enact legislation for a period of four years

¹ *The Spectator* (London) at the time commented: 'A passionate and stimulating book aimed at shaking up anyone still indifferent to events in Germany' (on the jacket of the Martin Secker edition of *The Oppermanns* (translated by James Cleugh. London: Martin Secker, 1933). The current English-language editions, with revised translations, are: London: Persephone Books, 2020; and New York: McNally Editions, 2022.

without any involvement from the Reichstag. With the 7 April 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, the Nazis also moved swiftly to start the process of removing civil rights. The 7 April 1933 legislation, which stripped Jews and “the politically unreliable” of the right to work as civil servants, marked the first step towards the establishment of the Nazi racial state, in which existing notions concerning equality before the law ceased to apply.

More or less simultaneously, on 1 April 1933, a boycott of Jewish shops all over Germany was announced. The boycott was not popular with ordinary people, who resented being kept out of Jewish-owned department stores. Few non-Jewish people came to the assistance of their Jewish fellow citizens, though at this stage active boycotts appealed mainly to fully committed Nazis rather than the broader public. After a few days the boycott was called off, but it set the tone for subsequent Nazi policy regarding Jewish-owned businesses.

On the Day of German Labour, 1 May 1933, the new regime organized events and celebrations in an effort to persuade the public that the Nazi Party was genuinely a party of the workers. Yet shortly afterwards squads of stormtroopers entered trade union buildings all over Germany, arrested officials and seized files. With little resistance, Germany’s free trade union movement, one of the most powerful in Europe, was comprehensively destroyed. Of all the Nazis’ early actions in these first few months of 1933, this was perhaps the most dramatic single episode in the dynamic and brutal drive for power and the annihilation of their opponents.

By July 1933, all political parties other than the Nazi Party had ceased to exist: the opposition parties had deluded themselves that they could somehow survive but were rendered powerless when the one-party state was formalized by the 14 July 1933 Law against the Founding of New Parties.

In the realm of research and academia, the revolution against the ideas and values of the Enlightenment also moved forward. Many of Germany’s leading writers, journalists and intellectuals, including Lion Feuchtwanger, and some of the best-known members of the scientific and scholarly communities, had to leave the country, and books were removed from libraries and in some instances ceremonially burned.

Although the Nazi takeover brought these sweeping political, ideological and cultural changes, it was not an economic revolution to the same extent. Too much of a disruption of industry, as the more revolutionary elements in the Nazi Party would have liked, had to be avoided, and in fact the fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system, namely private ownership, did not change throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich.

Nonetheless, industry and commerce did experience *Gleichschaltung*, and it was clear from the start that conformity with the new regime’s political aims would have to become an agenda item at company board meetings. This meant *inter alia* that companies were forced to hire Nazi activists to open positions or to give them promotions. Companies were also expected to participate in driving Jewish companies out of business, as we will explain below.

For large and small enterprises, there were many reasons to believe in the new government and its assurances that there would be opportunity for economic growth. Moreover, business owners to some extent welcomed the fact that the regime had eliminated the trade unions and left-wing parties, who were natural opponents of the business community.

The start of “voluntary” Aryanisation

Modern historians use the Nazi term Aryanisation to denote a set of policies and actions that constituted organized theft under a veneer of legality. In the initial phase, for the first two years after the Nazi takeover, Aryanisation was conceived as a “voluntary” process. This meant that the regime’s strategy was geared to making the business environment more difficult for Jewish enterprises, in the expectation that Jewish business owners might respond by voluntarily selling or giving up control of their enterprises.

The strategy consisted of various elements: first, external intimidation, achieved through harassment of customers of Jewish businesses by law enforcement officers and stormtroopers, for example during the 1 April 1933 boycott. To augment these efforts, Nazi Party activists aimed to discourage public-sector entities from buying goods and services from Jewish companies.

Another element of the strategy was a form of cultural Aryanisation: many German owners of small and medium-sized firms adopted company names or advertising slogans containing formulations such as “true German” or excessive use of the adjective “German”, to call into question the reputations of their Jewish competitors.

A further element was the introduction of special taxes on Jewish businesses. The targets were small and medium-sized companies; the circumstances faced by large corporations were very different² and will not be covered here. Responsibilities and decision-making concerning these special taxes were devolved to *Gau* (regional) economic advisers and below that to local party organisations, mayors, and local government administrators. In cities such as Munich, where numerous members of the Feuchtwanger family had worked in commerce for generations, the *Gau* party leadership established its own Aryanisation offices, responsible for collection of the special taxes³. Corrupt local functionaries often pilfered the proceeds. During this initial phase of Aryanisation, central government deliberately played a background role, for tactical reasons and due to concerns over the potential impact on the economy.

For the first two years of the Third Reich, Jewish owners of small and medium-sized businesses who, in response to these various forms of duress, chose “voluntarily” to sell their enterprises were at least still able to negotiate a relatively reasonable price. The price was allowed to include inventory and intangible assets such as reputational goodwill. However, only a percentage of the proceeds from the sale could be taken out of the country, as the Reich Capital Flight Tax, introduced under Chancellor Brüning in 1931, underwent amendment in 1934 specifically to place a heavy burden on emigrating Jews.

During this “voluntary” Aryanisation phase, unscrupulous businesspeople who were not Jewish had the opportunity to pursue personal gain by acquiring ownership of Aryanised businesses. For the Nazi regime, this process had the advantage of being self-reinforcing: anyone who profiteered when a Jewish business was sold had to remain hand-in-glove with the regime from then on. Historians have placed the behaviours of the buyers of Aryanised small and medium-sized businesses in the following categories: profiteers who exploited the situation by underpricing the value of inventory, or drove down the selling price through personal initiatives against the Jewish owners; silent partners of the regime who pursued their own self-interest inconspicuously,

² See for example William M. Katin, *Hostile Takeovers of Large Jewish Companies, 1933-1935: Reassessing Aryanisation of Jewish-Owned Firms* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021).

³ Frank Bajohr, 'Aryanisation and Restitution in Germany', in: Martin Dean et al (eds.), *Robbery and Restitution, The Conflict over Jewish Property in Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 33-45.

without any personal initiatives either for or against the Jewish owners; and genuinely well-intentioned buyers who offered the Jewish owners a fair price and in doing so may in fact have acted illegally under National Socialist law. Buyers had considerable scope and freedom in terms of how to handle such transactions. Concrete examples and illustrations of these processes can be found in the relevant studies⁴.

“Voluntary” Aryanisation in *The Oppermanns*

These and the many other aspects of *Gleichschaltung* were widely reported in the international press, whose foreign correspondents based in Germany regularly sounded the alarm to their readers about the situation⁵. Working in exile from the relatively safe haven of southern France, Lion Feuchtwanger was able to join this chorus of voices.

Between 1920 and 1933 Lion Feuchtwanger had already published three works—one satirical short story and two novels—in which he had tackled the subject of antisemitism in Germany. In the third of these works, *Success* (1930), he had exposed antisemitism in Bavarian politics and society, satirized the emerging Nazi Party, and had drawn attention to the increasing politicization of Bavaria's judicial and penal system, as well as providing a compelling fictionalized account of the 1923 Munich Putsch. Although *Success* had helped garner him a Nobel Prize for Literature nomination in 1930, it meant that after January 1933 his books were publicly burned, his citizenship was stripped, and his name appeared on publishing blacklists.⁶

Lion Feuchtwanger continued to write for newspapers and journals outside Germany after 30 January 1933. For the purposes of this article, of particular note is the following piece he wrote for the London *Evening Standard* on 22 March 1933, in which he described the worsening situation in Germany:

⁴ For example Dean et al, *ibid*.

⁵ For a detailed account of how foreign correspondents reported the events in Germany, see Andrew Nagorski, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

⁶ For additional background, see Adrian Feuchtwanger, "Das Buch Bayern": The Portrayal of Antisemitism and the 'Wahrhaft Deutschen' in *Erfolg*, in: *Feuchtwanger Studies 10* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2022).
<<https://www.feuchtwanger.com/IFS19AdrianFeuchtwanger.pdf>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

I WARN THE

JEW-BAITERS

By Dr. LION FEUCHTWANGER

LION FEUCHTWANGER, author of "Jew Suss," and himself a Jew, alleges that pogroms unmatched since the 14th century are taking place in Germany. He tells of atrocities inflicted not only on Jews but also on Catholics and Socialists, which may cause terrible civil war. He gives his own explanation of the Nazis' motive in raiding his Berlin house and confiscating his manuscripts. The "Evening Standard," while remaining impartial, publishes Dr. Feuchtwanger's article as the pronouncement of a distinguished author on a subject of world importance.

JUST before I left America, shortly before the German elections were held, I declared to anxious friends that any idea of pogroms in Germany was unthinkable. Hindenburg's name and the solid foundations of German culture were pledged against any such occurrences.

During the journey across the Atlantic we received on board the ship day by day disturbing wireless reports about acts of violence against Jews, violations of their rights, assaults, robberies and killings. I could not believe these reports. It is true that I had with me the book written by the Imperial Chancellor, and I read with a troubled mind the pages in which he prophesied in wild and violent language vengeance which would strike his political antagonists. I noticed, with deep pity, the profound satisfaction with which the Chancellor explained how his supporters would beat up his opponents. At the same time, I said to myself that the Chancellor would never be far removed from the agitator; that the policy of Hitler the Chancellor was much more circumspect than the tone of Hitler the speaker of the big drum that spirit of responsibility which he thought to the highest official post in the Reich will prevent him from indulging his fantastic ideas in practice.

When I arrived in Europe I had my intention to travel to Berlin. I met the refugees from Germany. Their stories they were dreadful. They were compared with the horrors of the war. I did not believe these accounts, but I was told that the people who told them were not people, in no way radical, but honest and members of the Catholic Party, pacifists who all their lives had been in favour of mediation and peace and who hated all exaggeration. I had seen with their own eyes how they had been made to throw people out of ground trains in motion simply because they looked like Jews; they had also seen people—some of them women and children—who had been dragged out of motor-cars and beaten because they were thought to be Jews.

I had heard despairing stories of how these husbands had been dragged out and inhumanly beaten and about how many more had been heard of or seen; how many had been allowed to see wife or son who had been taken away by the Nazi Storm Troops and had disappeared one knew where. For instance, these people ask, is it possible that the Vice-President of the Berlin Chamber of Commerce, Bernard Weiss? Where have the little son of the Jewess Ruth and his wife gone?

not anticipated, even by Herr Goering. 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 S.A. men have been driving about in motorcars taken away from Jews on the ground 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 looked like Jews or bore Jewish names, or how many have been shot "while trying to escape."

We shall never know to what ill-treatment Jewish prisoners have been subjected. There are trustworthy people who report on these incredible abominations; but other facts, too, point to the reliability of their reports.

Bold gentlemen like the present Minister feel moved to advise moderation. Men of the Red Cross are not allowed to attend the people who have been ill-treated, and information about many of those who have disappeared is refused. It is even officially admitted that the Bavarian Minister, Herr Stuetzel, who enjoys the highest regard of the majority of the population, was thrashed by S.A. men. It is not contradicted that S.A. men, in a spirit of levity, "rubbed down," as the saying goes, a large number of Jews, who will probably never get over it for the rest of their lives.

I am afraid that, taking it all in all, the people who say that Germany has never seen such a measure of barbarism since the Thirty Years' War are right.

Compared with the outrages which have been committed, what has happened to me is nothing but a trifle, and I am surprised that, in view of the other horrors, any notice should have been taken of it.

My house in Berlin is a beautiful one, I admit, and I am fond of it. I was looking forward to being in it and again enjoying its peace after my hectic journey through America.

I had, however, been careless. It is true that while in America I had refused unusually high fees to lecture about Hitler, but I had, in reply to urgent questions, uttered a couple of brief sentences about his literary style.

This strictly professional appreciation, which I supported by quotations from the studies in style of the famous philologist Eduard Engel, was answered by Hitler's men by the confiscation of my wife's motor-car, by my servants being threatened with revolvers, while the manuscripts sent to me by foreign authors to read were either taken away or destroyed.

The same thing was done with the notes and manuscript of my new half-finished novel.

be glossed over by being called house searches. The year 1933 is the darkest year in the last five centuries of the history of German culture and German Jewry. The powers behind National Socialism, namely, feudalism and militarism, have in their difficulty unchained the bestiality of the masses in order to save themselves, and are now clearly frightened of the consequences.

Attempts at calming the situation are now no longer any good. It is to be hoped that they will have the courage not only to beg for discipline, but also to restore it, otherwise I foresee immense dangers for Germany and the world.

The political and cultural leaders of the

Left and the Centre, who represent the majority of the population, have been driven out of the country. Those who have been imprisoned, tortured and killed, and the persecuted population, robbed of their property, who could counsel wisdom, may avenge itself.

I greatly hope that the Government will succeed in calling a halt before the present, torture and slaughter of the Jews, Socialists, Catholics and Jews, and before a civil-war such as the world has never yet seen.

Berne. LION FEUCHTWANGER



DR. FEUCHTWANGER.

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Along with other sardonic comments, the article contained the remarks: "I am not talking of such incidents as the driving of Jewish doctors out of the clinics by government order, or of the fact that Jewish lawyers and judges are not allowed to carry out their duties, or that a large number of stormtroopers have been driving about in motorcars taken away from Jews on the grounds that it is 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 due to their Jewish appearance or Jewish names. It is unclear how many have been shot "while trying to escape". The sarcastic tone here is characteristic of Lion Feuchtwanger attitude to Nazism during this period, as is clear from some of his letters and diary entries⁷.

Nine months then elapsed before *The Oppermanns (Die Geschwister Oppermann)* came out at the end of 1933. The novel was published in German by Querido Verlag, which specialized in works by exiled German authors and was a subsidiary of the well-established Amsterdam-based publishing house Em. Querido's Uitgeverij N.V. The novel also appeared simultaneously in English, published by Martin Secker in London⁸, and also in other languages.

The novel presents the situation in Germany from the viewpoint of a Jewish family who own and manage a successful furniture business that manufactures household furniture and sells it through retail stores, including their flagship store in Berlin.

The Oppermann family had been established in Germany from time immemorial. They originally came from Alsace. There they had been bankers on a small scale, merchants, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. The great-grandfather of the present generation of Oppermanns had come to Berlin from Fürth in Bavaria. The grandfather, Immanuel Oppermann, had filled important contracts as purveyor to the German armies operating in France in the years 1870-71. A framed document hung in the private office of the Oppermann firm, in which the taciturn Field Marshal von Moltke attested that Herr Oppermann had rendered the German army good service. A few years later Immanuel had founded the furniture firm of Oppermann. It was an undertaking that manufactured household furniture for the middle classes and, by standardising its products, was able to give good value. Immanuel took a personal interest in its customers, sounded them out, teased out their hidden desires, created new needs for them, and then proceeded to supply these needs. His jokes were repeated everywhere. They were an excellent combination of Berlin common sense and his individual brand of genial scepticism. He became a well-liked personality in Berlin and soon his popularity began to extend beyond the city. It was by no means due solely to personal vanity that the Oppermann brothers later registered his picture as the trademark of their firm. Through his integrity and manifold connections with all sorts of people, he contributed toward making the emancipation of the German Jew a fact, not a mere printed paragraph: giving them a real home in Germany⁹.

Currently in charge of the running of the family firm is Martin Oppermann, a resolute man whose loyalties lie with his family and with the business. He is married to a non-Jewish German woman,

⁷ See the recently reissued collection of essays, Nele Holdack, Marje Schuetze-Coburn and Michaela Ullmann (eds.), *Lion Feuchtwanger. Bin ich deutscher oder jüdischer Schriftsteller? Betrachtungen eines Kosmopoliten* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2023).

⁸ *The Oppermanns*, the 1933 Martin Secker edition, *ibid*. The US edition came out in 1934 (New York: Viking Press). Current edition in the original German: Lion Feuchtwanger, *Die Geschwister Oppermann* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008, (Eighth Edition)).

⁹ *The Oppermanns* (New York: McNally Editions, 2022), 9-10.

Liselotte, and they have one child, Berthold, a teenager. Martin's weakness is a slight arrogance and inflexibility, reflected in his initial reluctance to countenance the possibility, in November 1932, that National Socialism might present an existential threat to the family business. He has three siblings who are joint shareholders in the business and attend its board meetings: Gustav, a writer, Edgar, a leading laryngologist, and Klara, a homemaker.

The Oppermanns' main antagonist is Heinrich Wels, who runs an artisanal furniture company. The Oppermann Furniture Company has a business relationship with Wels's company that goes back a long way.

At the very beginning, Immanuel Oppermann had not manufactured the furniture that he sold, but had left its manufacture to Heinrich Wels senior, then a trustworthy young workman. When branch shops were established in Berlin, one in Steglitz and one in Potsdamer Strasse, it became more difficult to continue the arrangements with Wels, who was reliable but charged too much for his work. Soon after the death of Immanuel Oppermann, the firm began, at the instigation of Siegfried Brieger, one of the firm's middle managers¹⁰, to have part of the products made in cheaper factories. When the management of the business passed on to Gustav and Martin, they opened a factory of their own. For more complicated jobs and for special orders they had recourse, as before, to Wels' workshop. But the principal needs of Oppermann's Furniture Stores, which had meanwhile established another branch in Berlin and five provincial branches, were now filled by their own workshops.

Heinrich Wels junior regarded this development with bitterness. He was a few years older than Gustav, a hard-working, reliable, slow thinking man. He linked his factory to retail shops, model enterprises run with infinite care, in order to compete with the Oppermanns. But he was not successful in this. His prices could not compete with those of the standardised Oppermann furniture [...] It hurt his craftsman's pride. Had the recognition of solid merit died out in Germany? Could not these misguided purchasers see that at one of his, Wels's, tables a single man had laboured for eighteen hours, whereas the Oppermann stuff was merely the product of a factory?¹¹

As well as nurturing these long-standing personal resentments, Wels is driven by his political views: he is a Nazi Party member and believes the Nazi conspiracy theory that Jewish-owned companies are in some inscrutable manner deliberately driving non-Jewish-owned firms out of business.

A movement was making headway that spread the idea that handmade articles were better suited to the character of the German people than the standardised products of factories run on international lines. This movement called itself National Socialism. It freely expressed what Heinrich Wels had long secretly felt, namely that Jewish firms with their cut-price methods were responsible for Germany's decline. Heinrich Wels associated himself wholeheartedly with the movement. He became a District Chief of the party. He saw with delight that the movement was gaining ground. It was true that people still preferred to buy cheaper tables but at least they abused the Oppermanns while they did so. The party also managed to put a higher tax rate on

¹⁰ A Prokurist.

¹¹ McNally Editions, *ibid.*, 16-17.

the larger stores so that the Oppermanns gradually had to raise their prices for tables, for which Wels charged fifty-four marks, from forty to forty-six marks¹².

At the beginning of the novel, in November 1932, relations between the two companies are still on a relatively equal footing. Martin Oppermann is uncertain of what the changing political conditions will actually bring, and for the time being is weighing the possibility of an interim approach: changing the company name to the non-Jewish-sounding German Furniture Company. Martin therefore holds a meeting with Wels at which they discuss, with mutual suspicion, a potential merger of one of the Oppermann Berlin branches and one of its provincial branches with the corresponding Wels operations. The meeting ends with no outcome, however.

In the central section of the novel, which takes place in February 1933, market conditions have already changed. Martin and his siblings are now reluctantly having to contemplate a full-scale merger with Wels's company. A key reason is that newspapers aligned with the regime are urging consumers to desist from buying furniture from a company known to be Jewish-owned, and it is evident to the Oppermanns that this situation is going to worsen.

Martin attends a meeting held at Wels's company. Wels, now in stormtrooper officer uniform, has become far more strident in the demands he makes to Martin.

Martin sat down obediently. "It is quite clear to you, I suppose," Wels went on, "that the name of Oppermann and everything referring to it must disappear. There can be no more Oppermann furniture in the New Germany. You understand that?"

Martin concurs, realising that under the circumstances a full-scale merger is the only way forward.

They went into details: discussed the complicated adjustment of such questions as to what extent the Oppermanns should share in the management and in the profits of the new business.

Martin's further thoughts concerning the "favourable" financial terms he has negotiated are interspersed among his reflections as he returns home.

If Immanuel Oppermann had been in his place, he would long ago have made sure of the safety of his people as well as that of his money and would have liquidated the business¹³.

The following evening, Martin advises his siblings to join him in signing the merger agreement he has drawn up with Wels, though it is clear from the body language of the other characters that they consider the merger a defeat. The new entity will trade as the 'German Furniture Company', with Wels in charge of operations. Only the original Oppermann store in Berlin's Gertraudenstrasse will remain an independent entity run by Martin and Gustav, but that transitional phase will end at the turn of the year.

In a scene which resonates throughout the rest of the novel, the four Oppermann siblings sit in silence, struck by the enormity of human folly and how it endures as an elemental force against which the strength and wisdom of the individual are powerless—a frequent theme in Lion Feuchtwanger's work.

¹² Ibid., 17.

¹³ Ibid., 173-6.

There they sat together, all the Oppermanns, at a great round table that went back to the time of Immanuel Oppermann. It was a solid old table of walnut, which had been made long ago under the personal supervision of Heinrich Wels senior. The portrait of old Oppermann hung above their heads. They had not all been together since that evening in Max Reger Strasse on Gustav's birthday. They belonged together, that was obvious. And the picture was also part of them. This inseparability had now become their most precious possession, the only thing that remained securely their own. Everything else around them was disappearing, slipping from under their feet.

A few weeks later, while still technically a director of the company, Martin discovers he has been denounced, as he still has Jews on the payroll. For this he is arrested and taken to a stormtrooper barracks, where he is interrogated under duress. The following morning he is released, and shortly afterwards begins to make plans to emigrate.

Interwoven with the boardroom scenes are a series of scenes involving Wolfsohn, an Oppermann Furniture Company salesman. Wolfsohn, who is Jewish, has experienced increasing levels of antisemitism in various forms and decides to emigrate to Mandate Palestine. Further emotional heft comes with the suicide of Berthold Oppermann, and also when stormtroopers enter Edgar Oppermann's clinic to eject Jewish members of his medical team from the building.

The novel is a work of conventional realist fiction employing free indirect speech to express the characters' thoughts. The narrator does not pass implicit or explicit judgement, and the events are presented even-handedly, apart from occasional narratorial sidelong glances at the protagonists as well as the antagonists. Further analysis of the novel's other main storylines and narrative elements can be found in other volumes of *Feuchtwanger Studies*¹⁴.

Expropriation of certain assets of various Feuchtwanger family members

Two years after the events depicted in the novel, in 1935-6, the government's Aryanisation policy entered a new phase. Nazi Party-appointed *Gau* economic advisers invoked new powers assigned to them by the Commission for Economic Policy in Munich and began to supervise, authorize and inspect sales contracts between Jewish businesspeople and non-Jewish German buyers. The goal was to intervene in freedom of contract by artificially dragging down the prices at which Jewish-owned¹⁵ enterprises could sell their goods and services.

Aryanisation policy underwent even more rapid radicalisation after *Kristallnacht* (the 9 November 1938 pogrom), with a transition to compulsory Aryanisation fully imposed by the state. The 12 November 1938 Decree on the Exclusion of Jews from German Commercial Life, prohibited Jews from running small retail shops or artisan businesses; and following the issue of the 3 December 1938 Decree on the Utilisation of Jewish Property, there were yet further concerted efforts to make Jewish owners of small and medium-sized businesses sell their operations and inventory to non-Jews. Under the supervision of a state-appointed trustee, a Jewish business owner could at this point expect to receive no more than a nominal payment in return for selling their enterprise. That payment was usually paid into a blocked account. As a general rule, the trustee

¹⁴ See for example Adrian Feuchtwanger, 'Die Geschwister Oppermann: A German Jewish Family in Extremis', in: *Feuchtwanger Studies 7* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2020). <https://www.feuchtwanger.com/Adrian_Feuchtwanger_Feuchtwanger_Studies_7.pdf>, accessed 1 December 2025.

¹⁵ For an explanation of how Jews were defined under the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, see <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nuremberg-laws>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

then sold the enterprise to non-Jewish businesspeople for market value, thereby generating funds for the Reich. Those Jewish business owners who were being held in concentration camps following *Kristallnacht* had in some instances to sell their businesses as a *quid pro quo* for their release.

Examples of various aspects of these processes can be found among the biographical stories of Feuchtwanger family members¹⁶. What happened to these family members' assets usefully illustrates the various phases and various different forms of Aryanisation and expropriation between 1933 and the end of 1938.

Expropriation of assets of Lion Feuchtwanger

As Lion Feuchtwanger was a declared enemy of the regime, he prudently never returned to Germany after the Nazis took power. On 30 January 1933 he was on book tour in the United States and was warned to go into exile. This made it easy for the regime to expropriate his assets without delay: his Mahlerstrasse 8 house in Berlin, which he and Marta Feuchtwanger had bought in 1931, and the valuable antique books which he kept at the house for use as a working library of primary sources for his historical novels. Since he was now in exile, the only action Lion Feuchtwanger was able to take was to write objection letters for publication in newspapers and journals outside Germany. One of these, an open letter which he wrote to the subsequent occupant of his Mahlerstrasse 8 house, has been frequently anthologized. This open letter originally appeared in the Paris-based German-language exile newspaper *Pariser Tageblatt*¹⁷, and was also included in the recent 2023 reissue of Lion Feuchtwanger essays¹⁸, partly because it contains instantly memorable lines, and partly because it has recently gained renewed traction, particularly in the English-speaking world,¹⁹ as a rallying cry against perceived state-sponsored oppression in general:

“How do you like my house, Herr X? Are you enjoying living there? Was there any damage to the silvery-grey carpets upstairs when the stormtroopers were there looting? They were intent on exploiting the situation while I was away in America, and

¹⁶ See also Edgar Feuchtwanger, *I Was Hitler's Neighbour* (memoirs) (London: Bretwalda Books, 2015). Narrativised as Edgar Feuchtwanger and Bertil Scali, *Hitler, My Neighbor, Memories of a Jewish Childhood* (New York: Other Press, 2017). Filmed as *Hitler My Neighbour*. [Film]. Directed by François Bordes and Bertil Scali. France: Kuiv-Michel Rotman Productions (2013). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6Zvb3g_S3E>, accessed 1 December 2025. A description of how the assets of the publishing operations of Martin Feuchtwanger were expropriated can be found in Martin Feuchtwanger, *Zukunft ist ein blindes Spiel* (Berlin: Aufbau Tb, 1999). Recent articles also include: Roland Jaeger, 'Martin Feuchtwanger und sein Exilverlag ›Edition Olympia‹ in Tel Aviv', in: *Aus dem Antiquariat*, NF 14, 2016, No. 2, 75–88); and Münchner Stadtmuseum, 'Restitution to the Feuchtwanger family in Winchester, England of a silver spoon confiscated by the Nazis', <<https://www.muenchner-stadtmuseum.de/en/collections/provenance-research/restitution-of-a-silver-spoon-confiscated-by-the-nazis>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

¹⁷ <<https://www.lbi.org/german-exile-publishers/verlag-pariser-tageszeitung/>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

¹⁸ Lion Feuchtwanger, 'Offener Brief an den Bewohner meines Hauses Mahlerstrasse 8 in Berlin' (1935), in Holdack et al., *ibid*, 81-4. English translation here by Adrian Feuchtwanger.

¹⁹ See for example JTA, 'Jude Law reads migrants Jew's message to Nazis', *Times of Israel*, 25 February 2016, <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jude-law-reads-migrants-jewish-authors-letter-to-nazis/>>, accessed 1 December 2025. Jude Law and other British actors gave the live performance for 200 migrants at a 4,000-person refugee camp in Calais, as part of the *Letters Live* series (<https://letterslive.com>), accessed 1 December 2025.

my caretaker had to stay in relative safety upstairs. Red leaves behind a powerful stain which is hard to remove.”

The blood imagery is a reference to the violent mistreatment meted out to the caretaker of the house, who bravely managed to save some of Lion Feuchtwanger’s manuscripts from the hands of the stormtroopers but was severely beaten up while doing so²⁰.

Notwithstanding these financial losses, by mid-1933 Lion Feuchtwanger had reestablished himself in southern France and had begun work on *The Oppermanns*, as described in this 16 May 1933 private letter sent from Sanary-sur-Mer to his friend and fellow writer Bertolt Brecht:²¹

“I am working with great intensity. What I am doing is, from a conceptual standpoint, almost as lean as the letter you sent, but perhaps it will prove a worthwhile endeavour. All that matters is that the book comes out by the end of the year. This is forcing me to engage in productive output for up to ten hours a day.”

The effort paid off, and by January 1934, shortly after the novel came out, Lion Feuchtwanger was able to write to Brecht:

“The Oppermanns is doing well, albeit not on a grand scale; it will doubtless make a significant impact.”²²

The experiences of Heinrich Rheinstrom

Another well-known Munich figure and Feuchtwanger family member, the lawyer and entrepreneur Heinrich Rheinstrom, also suffered expropriation of all of his assets in 1933 and the ensuing period. His experiences illustrate how in 1933 the regime quickly initiated processes to undermine Jewish lawyers’ ability to run commercially viable law practices, and in some instances subjected them to public humiliation through smear campaigns in the Nazi-aligned press²³.

²⁰ The most recent biography of Lion Feuchtwanger is: Andreas Heusler, *Lion Feuchtwanger, Münchner – Emigrant – Weltbürger* (Residenz Verlag: Vienna, 2014).

²¹ Lion Feuchtwanger to Bertolt Brecht, 31 July 1933, in: Lion Feuchtwanger, *Briefwechsel mit Freunden 1933-1958, Band I*, (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1991), 20. English translation here by Adrian Feuchtwanger.

²² Ibid, 21.

²³ See Wolfgang Schön and Sara Dietz, 'Heinrich Rheinstrom (1884-1960), Steuer-, Bilanz- und Aktienrecht in Weltkrieg und Weimarer Republik' in: Helmut Siekmann and Andreas Cahn (eds.), *Festschrift für Theodor Baums zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 1081-1113.

<https://www.feuchtwanger.com/HeinrichRheinstrom_WSandSD.pdf>, accessed on 1 December 2025.



Heinrich Rheinstrom, Munich, late 1920s

Source: Private archive of Edgar Feuchtwanger

Heinrich Rheinstrom²⁴ was one of the brothers of Erna Feuchtwanger née Rheinstrom, a sister-in-law of Lion Feuchtwanger. A decorated World War I veteran, Heinrich Rheinstrom established his own law firm during the Weimar Republic and built a reputation as a legal advisor to numerous German and foreign companies and leading personalities among Munich's elites. By 1933, his law practice was one of the most successful in its field in Munich. Mainly active in commercial and tax law, he also advised his clients on civil law matters. His client list included for example the composer Richard Strauss and the brothers Otto and Alfred Walterspiel, owners of the Hotel Vier Jahreszeiten on Munich's upmarket Maximilianstrasse.

Heinrich Rheinstrom's influence in Munich was due not just to the social standing of his clientele, but also to his own entrepreneurial energy and commercial acumen. He sat as a member on twenty-six supervisory boards, among them railway companies in Germany, Holland, Austria, Hungary, and Romania, and also on the supervisory board of the sparkling wine company Henkell. In addition, he held an honorary professorship in tax law at Technische Hochschule Munich and published numerous scholarly articles in the field. His own commercial interests included the ownership of property in the centre of Munich. Since he fell into the "prominent Jewish businessman" category, the National Socialists had already branded him an enemy before they came to power.

Political persecution of Heinrich Rheinstrom after 30 January 1933

On 23 March 1933, after the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* called for the "purification of the Jew-infested legal profession", National Socialist lawyers and economists employed by the *Gau* Munich-Upper Bavaria unanimously demanded that all Jews be removed

²⁴ See *The Feuchtwanger Family*, *ibid.* See also <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Rheinstrom>, accessed 1 December 2025.

from public office and that Jewish lawyers be prohibited from appearing in court²⁵. Bavaria's judicial administration, on the orders of the acting Bavarian Minister of Justice Hans Frank, responded by taking action against Jewish judges and lawyers.

Heinrich Rheinstrom was in London for five days in March 1933 for professional reasons when he received the news that his Ludwigstrasse home had been broken into and looted by stormtroopers²⁶. He was warned not to return to Germany under any circumstances, as he would face arrest. He wisely decided not to return, even though this meant the loss of all of his tangible and intangible assets.

A few weeks later, in the summer of 1933, the Gestapo conducted a search of his law offices and confiscated files that they deemed "incriminating evidence"²⁷. On 13 July 1933, Munich I Regional Court launched investigations against him and an arrest warrant for fraud was issued. In order to impugn his reputation, the *Völkischer Beobachter* ran an article in which it asserted that he was involved in tax evasion²⁸. This was followed by a further *Völkischer Beobachter* article, dated 30 July 1933, entitled 'The legacy of the fugitive Heinrich Rheinstrom', which aimed to settle scores by declaring him a "selfish and brutal" businessman who acted only in the interests of the wealthy to the detriment of "small businessmen, craftsmen, etc."²⁹ Heinrich Rheinstrom was, moreover, one of the six "non-Aryans" purged from the teaching staff at Technische Hochschule Munich³⁰ under the 7 April 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service.

Subsequent 1934 correspondence between the Bavarian Ministry of Justice and the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior mentions the arrest warrant, states that Heinrich Rheinstrom had been engaged in tax evasion, asserts that the Political Police were in possession of incriminating evidence against him – and that therefore his citizenship would have to be revoked³¹. Himmler himself gave his personal support to the allegations.³²

To settle the alleged tax debts, the furniture and artworks in Heinrich Rheinstrom's Ludwigstrasse home were seized and auctioned off³³. Later a physician named Alfred Schittenhelm, who was a Nazi party member, moved into the house³⁴. On 28 June 1937 land

²⁵ See Reinhard Weber, *Das Schicksal der jüdischen Rechtsanwälte in Bayern nach 1933* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006), 57 et seq.

²⁶ Sworn declaration made by Heinrich Rheinstrom before the Bavarian Office of Restitution [Landesentschädigungsamt: see <<https://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Landesentsch%C3%A4digungsamt>>, accessed 1 December 2025]. Archival source: BayHStA LEA 2928 [Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv]; Weber, *ibid.*, 253. After World War II, Heinrich Rheinstrom sought restitution via the appropriate legal channels, see Schön and Dietz, *ibid.*

²⁷ Archival source: BayHStA LEA 2928.

²⁸ *Völkischer Beobachter*, 25 April 1933: 'Auch Sami Weiß abgedankt', Stadtarchiv München.

²⁹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, 30 July 1933: 'Die Hinterlassenschaft des geflüchteten Heinrich Rheinstrom', Staatsarchiv München.

³⁰ Elizabeth Kraus, 'Technische Hochschule München (THM): Anfang der 1930er-Jahre Hochburg nationalsozialistischer Studierender', Online-Lexikon von nsdoku münchen, <<https://www.nsdoku.de/lexikon/artikel/technische-hochschule-muenchen-830>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

³¹ Archival source: BayHStA MJu 21691.

³² *Unschuld*, Chronik des Rotary Club München zum 75. Jubiläum seiner Gründung 1928 – 2003, 2003, (footnote 26), 128.

³³ Heinrich Rheinstrom, sworn declaration, BayHStA LEA 2928, *ibid.*

³⁴ Schön and Dietz, *ibid.*

parcels owned by Heinrich Rheinstrom on Herzog-Wilhelmstrasse, Josephspitalstrasse, and Sonnenstrasse were auctioned off to the City of Munich³⁵.

Heinrich Rheinstrom's case is a telling example of how political persecution in 1933 often involved multiple areas of public administration, the judicial system, and the Nazi press. In his case, there was deliberate targeting of the commercial viability of his law firm, there was abuse of judicial due process, and his professional and commercial reputation was assailed through public humiliation in the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

In the mid-1930s Heinrich Rheinstrom was fortunately able to reestablish himself as a lawyer in Paris, albeit under constrained circumstances. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, in July 1939, he moved to New York, where he once again worked successfully as a lawyer, in the fields of European law and international finance, with clients mainly among German immigrants³⁶.

³⁵ Archival sources: BayHStA MJu 21691; Staatsarchiv München WB I JR 2113.

³⁶Schön and Dietz, *ibid*.

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PARIS, 28. Juni 1939.
26, AVENUE HENRI MARTIN

SYLVAIN CAHN-DEBRÉ
DOCTEUR EN DROIT
DE LA FACULTÉ DE PARIS

TÉLÉPHONE: PASSY 90-80
ADRESSE TÉLÉGRAPHIQUE: NEPACO

CABINET À LONDRES
HASTINGS HOUSE
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Herrn Dr. Ludwig Feuchtwanger,

Meine Lieben,

Wir fahren also jetzt endgültig am 5. Juli mit der "Normandie", da infolge der Verschiebung der Schlussverhandlungen in der Angelegenheit Rothschild auch unsere Dispositionen geändert werden mussten. Wir kommen am 10. Juli in New York an und ich gebe Euch hier auf alle Fälle unsere vorläufige Adresse: Salisbury Hotel, 123 West 57th Street, New York, N.Y., U.S.A.

Ich habe wegen Ludschis Bibliothek an Dr. Karl Rasche, ~~ausser~~ordentliches Vorstandsmitglied der Dresdner Bank geschrieben, der die Verhandlungen in der Angelegenheit Rothschild führt und den ich noch vor meiner Abreise hier erwarte. Auf alle Fälle ist das ein sehr mächtiger, wie ich glaube mir relativ wohlmeinender Mann, und wenn irgend jemand etwas erreichen kann, ist es sicher er, der wahrscheinlich auch Wert darauf legt, mir einen Gefallen zu tun. Ich werde Euch das Ergebnis noch mitteilen.

Einstweilen in Eile viele herzliche Grüsse

Eures

Heinrich

PS. Dass Lion Euch sehr nett geschrieben hat, wundert mich nicht. Es ist eine alte Erfahrung, von der mein Schwesterlein anscheinend immer noch keine Kenntnis genommen hat: "wie man in den Wald ruft, so schallt es heraus!" Das gilt nicht nur für Lion Feuchtwanger.

*ausser
Wappell
aber nicht
Ludwig. Ich werde
de
von
auf
nicht*

Letter from Heinrich Rheinstrom to his brother-in-law Ludwig Feuchtwanger and sister Erna Feuchtwanger née Rheinstrom, 28 June 1939.

Source: Private archive of Edgar Feuchtwanger

Expropriation of the Feuchtwanger family business

The final Feuchtwanger story in this article is that of Lion Feuchtwanger's brother Fritz Feuchtwanger. Until November 1938, Fritz Feuchtwanger was still living in Munich, managing E. Feuchtwanger Rinderfett & Margarine-Werke. The fate of that enterprise provides an example of how, immediately after *Kristallnacht*, the implementation of Aryanisation in some instances took place while the Jewish businessmen in question were in incarceration in a concentration camp.

Not unlike the Oppermann family business in Lion Feuchtwanger's novel, the roots of E. Feuchtwanger Rinderfett & Margarine-Werke lay in the 1860s. Commercial production of margarine underwent rapid growth in the 1870s in the Netherlands, and in the 1880s Elkan Feuchtwanger and his brother David Feuchtwanger spotted an opportunity to set up a small production site in Munich. Working in collaboration with a chemical engineer, in 1888 they acquired a production facility for a cost of 15,000 marks.³⁷ Production processes at the plant included not only margarine production but also the processing of fats and oils for soap. The success of the business over a period of nearly sixty years mirrored the extent to which Jewish German companies had become, by the late 19th and early 20th century, significant pillars of the German economy in fields such as chemical engineering and production engineering³⁸.



E. Feuchtwanger Rinderfett & Margarine-Werke marketing materials, Munich, 1920s

Source: Private archive of Edgar Feuchtwanger

As of 30 January 1933, ownership and management were in the hands of Fritz Feuchtwanger and Otto Berg, and as of 9 November 1938, the company was still trading as Neumann & Feuchtwanger GmbH, at Grillparzerstrasse 6. Immediately after the pogrom, Fritz Feuchtwanger

³⁷ Heike Specht, *Die Feuchtwangers, Familie, Tradition und jüdisches Selbstverständnis im deutsch-jüdischen Bürgertum des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2006), 51.

³⁸ See Hans Pohl, 'Jüdische Unternehmer in ausgewählten Wirtschaftsbereichen – Einführung', in Werner E. Mosse (ed.), *Jüdische Unternehmer in Deutschland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992), 67-77.

was arrested and incarcerated in Dachau³⁹. A week later, on 17 November 1938, a sham board meeting of the company was held inside the concentration camp, under conditions of extreme duress⁴⁰. As a *quid pro quo* for his release, Fritz Feuchtwanger and Otto Berg were coerced into signing away ownership of their shares in their company, presumably in exchange for a nominal amount, to give the false impression that commercial law was being duly upheld. They were also forced to step down from the board of Neumann and Feuchtwanger⁴¹ and to stipulate formally who their successors as owners would be, as specified by the regime⁴².

It is fortunate that, through it all, it did not become apparent that Fritz Feuchtwanger was a brother of Lion, as that would have severely reduced his chances of emerging from Dachau alive. The authorities did not, one must assume, become aware of that fact, and Fritz Feuchtwanger was subsequently released, in very poor health. A few months later he was able to emigrate to the United States by ship from France's Atlantic coast, along with his wife and two daughters⁴³.



The former home of Fritz Feuchtwanger and his family on Munich's Possartstrasse

Source: Private archive of Edgar Feuchtwanger

³⁹ Ludwig Feuchtwanger was incarcerated in Dachau at the same time.

⁴⁰ See *Menschliches Versagen*. [Film] Directed by Michael Verhoeven. Germany: Sentana Filmproduktion (2008). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJyJXg3y1-M>> minute 52:15 et seq, accessed on 1 December 2025.

⁴¹ Specht, *ibid.*, 371-2.

⁴² Archival sources: Minutes of the 17 November 1938 board meeting, and 17 March 1950 letter from Fritz Feuchtwanger to the Bavarian Office of Restitution, in the files of the Restitution Authority of Upper Bavaria, Fritz Feuchtwanger, a1714.

⁴³ See also Edgar Feuchtwanger and Antonia Cox (ed. Anja Tuckermann), *Kinderbriefe aus dem Exil, Edgar Feuchtwanger in England 1939* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2024; forthcoming in English as *Dear Parents, Letters from Exile, 1939* (Berlin: PalmArtPress, Autumn 2026).



Fritz Feuchtwanger and his family emigrated to the United States by ship from France's Atlantic coast, in mid-1939

Source: Private archive of Edgar Feuchtwanger

Conclusion

Aryanisation was not merely a top-down political process: it was a social phenomenon in which stakeholders in German commercial life, corrupt administrators and officials in local government and the judicial system, and journalists working for the Nazi press, were complicit in numerous ways. The situation was easily exploited by profiteers, who were in some cases motivated by a potent mix of ideological belief and the desire for personal gain, or who merely wished to settle scores with former competitors. At the same time, the more morally upright members of management boards, business associations, and other organisations in commercial life were pressurized to distance themselves from their Jewish counterparts, causing psychological isolation for any Jewish businessperson whose self-esteem derived from a misguided sense of social integration. Aryanisation further damaged German commerce by destroying economic value in the form of the reputations of Jewish businesspeople. It also duped honest members of the business community into believing that the small and medium-sized business sector as a whole was on a more secure financial footing than it actually was. This proved to be a significant factor when the regime's demands on the economy intensified under wartime conditions.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The images that accompany this article can be viewed at <<https://www.feuchtwanger.com/FS10imgs.pptx>>, accessed 1 December 2025.

Index terms

Aryanisation

The Oppermanns

Ludwig Feuchtwanger

Erna Feuchtwanger née Rheinstrom

Edgar Feuchtwanger

Heinrich Rheinstrom

E. Feuchtwanger Rinderfett & Margarine-Werke

Fritz Feuchtwanger