



The Way It Was: The Jewish World of Rural Hesse

by Mathilda Wertheim Stein

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A Note from the Author:

In the early grades, I felt left out whenever my school mates in Lauterbach crowed about their German forebears. Beyond my grandparents, I knew nothing about mine. From my coworkers at the Joint Distribution Committee I detected that their brand of orthodox Judaism was not as rigorous as my own religious training. Moreover, I became aware that some well entrenched religious practices and rites of Jews in Upper Hesse were unknown in the United States. As the world of Jews in Upper Hesse was destroyed, I felt that a memory book of their lives and customs should be recorded. The Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv does not have record of the Jews of hamlets and small towns in Upper Hesse, hence encouraging my desire to preserve my heritage and that of the Jews of rural Hesse.

Review of *The Way It Was*

Taken from *Aufbau*, April 13, 2001

by Dr. Herbert D. Rosenbaum

"The Way It Really Was"

If piety, the dutiful respect or regard for parents, race, etc., may be expressed by writing a book, Mathilda Wertheim Stein's recently published *The Way It Was* is an act of great reverence for her forebears, for the communities from which they sprang, and for the agonizingly contradictory, complex history of Jews in the lands of Germany since their first appearance there as companions of the Roman Legions more than 1,500 years ago, and until their dispersal and mass destruction.

Mathilda Stein has written a detailed account of the lives of Jews in the rural villages of what is now called the State of Hesse, assembled over a period of more than twenty-five years of painstaking, relentless, tenacious dedication and

thoroughness. Without research grants, help from foundations, or great personal wealth, Mrs. Stein has adhered to her ambition to tell the oft-neglected story of Jewish rural lives and produced an outstanding document.

The many histories of the Jews of Germany divide their attention between narratives of suffering on the one hand, and of emancipation, acculturation or assimilation, and achievements on the other. It is not well known that, until the advent of the Great Disaster, approximately one half of the 600,000 Jews of Germany lived in hundreds upon hundreds of rural towns and villages. In the lands of Hesse alone one counted about 380 congregations. Indeed, Hesse had the greatest concentration of Jewish rural populations of all German lands. In the majority of those places, Jewish inhabitants often were so few that several communities had to be combined for synagogue worship, for Hebrew instruction of their children by itinerant teachers, for maintaining Chevraoth Kaddushim -- the burial societies -- or for the support of a kosher butcher. Nor is it well understood that in many of those enclaves families were deeply rooted in face of their often perilous and tenuous political, legal and economic situations. The continuity of Judaism in Germany, dependent though it may have been on the Yeshivoth of Worms, Speyer, Mainz and Frankfurt, owed perhaps even more to so-called "ordinary" people who, over the centuries, practiced their faith with tenacity. A recent history of rural Jewish life in Franconia points out that this was accomplished in face of nearly unrelenting, centuries-long attempts of Christian churches and secular authorities to convert Jews to the "true faith." In significant contrast to the life of Jews in the fast growing cities of Germany, religious orthodoxy prevailed in the villages, conversion to Christianity among them was rare, and intermarriage perhaps even rarer, though not absent, as Mrs. Stein is careful to point out and enumerate.

The author's attention to the history of her own, far-flung Wertheim family and to the town of Lauterbach near the cities of Alsfeld and Fulda does not distract her from providing the reader with an account of the historical context of the Jewish Diaspora in the German lands. Major events of that history are described and documented in separate chapters and also carefully interwoven in the many separate stories of the families and groups of the villages of the Vogelsberg region of Oberhessen. Thus, the generations of individuals and families are seen not only in their particularity and their uniqueness, but framed within the historical circumstances of their time, of the settings of Jewish mores and customs, and of the economic and socio-cultural setting of their "host cultures."

Jewish practices are as lovingly rendered and as carefully documented as are the many genealogies: the "B'rith Mila" is detailed ceremonially and

anatomically; the so-called "hologrash," a counterpart ceremony of naming female children; the custom of married men wearing their white burial shrouds on the high holidays; Sabbath observances in the home and in the synagogue; the pattern of Jewish education of children; observances of major and minor holidays; wedding celebrations featuring adaptations of the German custom of "Festschriften;" the practice of male and female use of the "mikveh," the ritual bath.

Similar care is given to Jewish institutions, especially to synagogues and prayer rooms large and small which dotted the landscape. Architectural drawings, paintings, and photographs, including maps of street locations, dates of erection and other details are carefully displayed.

While the history of the extended Wertheim family is most closely dealt with, as are the villages of their origin and residence, Mrs. Stein's detailed attention to generations of other families is manifestly amazing. One gets the sense that no one has been overlooked or omitted, that every consequential fact about them has been marshaled, every illustrative document and photograph provided. Together with all of that, the author generously draws her own rich and lively memories about many of the people and their activities, their businesses, even their reputations. That is especially true for the lives of the Jewish teachers, rabbis and congregational leaders, whose self-sacrificing and heroic conduct tried to insure the continuity of Jewish communal life and the protection of individuals and families. Nor is she sparing in her judgment of those whose conduct she finds wanting or sacrificing responses. Mathilda Stein does not flinch before unpleasant narratives.

So many people are accounted for that one is prompted to speculate about the number of presently living descendants of all of them, spread across the world as they now are: they must surely number in the thousands, and one wishes that all of them could know of this book and come to count it among their most important possessions.

The documentation featured in this marvelous volume deserves special mention. The attentive reader of *The Way It Was* will not be prompted to ask whether there is sufficient documentation, but instead, whether there are any significant pieces of firsthand evidence that the author has not seen, heard of, touched, collected and reproduced here. The rhetorical question answers itself: it's all here, assiduously assembled, and thoughtfully presented. There are copies of birth certificates, of photos of families and individuals, of "Schutzbriefe," marriage certificates, cemeteries and headstones, homes, neighborhoods, Jewish men in World War I uniforms, of Jewish children at school, of obituary

notices, and every other variety of physical manifestation of the life of rural Hessian Jews at home, at work, at play, at war, at prayer, at school, or at rest in cemeteries.

In the face of all of that faithfully rendered detail, the twenty-four chapters of the book are, nevertheless, framed within an overarching narrative. The history of Jews in Germany has, after all, a distinct beginning, a special kind of history and development, and a particular kind of ending. This remarkable book points up a portion of that history, but always recalling that it deals with only part of it. It looks at the beginning and the end of that story with a clear eye. It begins by tracing the historic antecedents of Jewish life in German lands, and by accounting for the peculiar dispersion of that people among non-Jews, and closes with a mournful accounting of events leading up to their disappearance and destruction, and with descriptions of the postwar aftermath in those same villages. One of the deep contradictions of that history is that the Jews of Hesse, like Jews elsewhere in Germany, had come to think of themselves as Germans, especially after the success of the centuries-long battle to become citizens in the fullest sense of that term, and after large numbers of them had made notable contributions to German social, political, artistic, economic, and scientific development of the 19th and 20th centuries. Even the deaths of more than 12,000 Jewish soldiers in World War I were regarded as tokens of that hard-won identity.

The emergence of the Hessian villages of the deadly anti-Semitism of the Nazi era is as carefully delineated as are the family histories. Names of perpetrators and descriptions of their acts can be found here. The arrests, interrogations, deportations, deprivations and humiliations, the destruction of synagogues, of forcible sales of businesses and homes, the night of broken glass, all that is here and it is always told in terms of the lives of individuals.

In that sense, the tragic story of the end of Jewish life in the Hessian villages stands in sharp contrast to the German Diaspora until the early 18th century, when, except for notables of one kind or other, the names of those who suffered the many agonies of those centuries are unknown to us. In the book at hand the suffering is portrayed in the most personal ways. The victims' names are on the pages, as are the pictures of their ruined synagogues. And, as powerful testimony to the fate of her many relatives, friends and fellow-villagers, there are nine pages of portraits, devoted to the Lauterbach families who perished: the Max Sterns, the Kugelmans, the Moritz Sterns, the Höchsters, the Jacobs, the Kates, the Friedländers, the Weinbergs, the Seligmans, the Pfifferlings, the Franks, the Steins, the two Strauss families and the Baumanns -- forty-seven people in all. Nineteen of those are represented by empty frames only, though as with all the rest, their names, dates of birth, places of origin, the places and the

dates of their execution are carefully noted.

A penultimate chapter called "Demography of Jews in Hesse Before 1933 and After 1945, Post War 'Reparations,' The Jews of Fulda, Jews in Postwar Lauterbach" takes a statistical look at the Hessian Jewish populations and their fate -- the radical decline in numbers, the frightful tolls taken by the Nazi extermination programs among children, the disappearance of entire communities. Here are the stories of the frustrating and nearly fruitless attempts of surviving victims to obtain some compensations for losses of homes, properties, businesses, and pension rights under the so-called Wiedergutmachung statutes enacted in Germany after the end of World War II. Administered by a reluctant bureaucracy, the valuations placed on their losses and the conditions surrounding their final disposition, plus the agents' fees for threading their way through the mazes of statutory and administrative rules, left the "petitioners" with the most minimal, even humiliating, awards, amounting to the tiniest fractions of what had been forcibly taken from them.

The possible revival of Jewish life in Hesse and the larger Germany is briefly addressed. Only the tiniest number of former inhabitants have returned to their old homes after surviving the Holocaust, or from the places of their refuge, and the postwar revival of Jewish life continues to depend on the new immigrants from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, many of whom are also Holocaust survivors. If historical perspectives were to be applied to that phenomenon, one could suggest that many, perhaps even most, of these newly arrived Yiddish-speaking Jews are the descendants of the very people expelled eastward from German lands during the 13th and 14th centuries and, by that token, are far less "the strangers" than the hundreds of thousands of others who now populate Germany without prior cultural ties to their host country. It remains for the future to tell what the newly constituted Germany will make of these immigrants, or they of it.

The Way It Was ends by telling the story of the Wertheim Family in their new country. Headed by a full-page photograph of Berta Lamm Wertheim and Vogel (Frederick) Wertheim, III (circa 1933) the author describes her parents' adapting the values and habits of their rural lives, accustomed to religious observance, to the heterodox, urban and tumultuously American New York of the nineteen-thirties. Here, too, Mrs. Stein links the fate of her own family to that of others from the Hessian towns who had escaped to other parts of the world, as if to say that their dispersal only testified to the strength of the connectedness of former times and lives.

The Epilogue following page 403 aims at no overarching conclusions, but

instead describes Mrs. Stein's 1959 visit to the ruined, wooden 1797-built synagogue of Angenrod, then littered with bicycles and farm implements, and finding some prayer books left by Jewish American soldiers of the Occupation Forces. On the wall of that old "Shul" could there still be seen the inscription that reads, in large, Hebrew lettering, "May the God who is always present comfort you together with the other mourners for Zion and Jerusalem."

That is a poignant and modest conclusion to a masterful and reverential work. It is as if Mathilda Wertheim Stein, having had her say in these many moving pages, is letting the meaning of her labors speak for itself.

Dr. Rosenbaum is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Hofstra University and a 1937 immigrant from the Hessian town of Großen-Linden.

About the Book:

"When I visited Angenrod Synagogue in 1959 (in Hesse about 100 km north of Frankfurt Am Main), the sanctuary was littered with bicycles and agricultural machines, which defiled the sanctity of the building. Although some of the Angenrod population were certainly aware of our displeasure with this state of affairs, they proudly emphasized that the synagogue in their village had survived the pogrom of Kristallnacht in Germany on November 10, 1938. However, the synagogue of 1797 endured for practical rather than ideological reasons: it was a wooden structure that had been built about nine feet away from other buildings. If the Nazis had set fire to the Angenrod Synagogue, then adjacent houses would also have gone up in flames. ...During my visit in 1959, I took from the synagogue any books I could find in Hebrew writing. Although no sacred books or scrolls of the Angenrod congregation had survived, one segment of Hebrew writing remained on the wall. Ironically it read, 'May the God who is always present comfort you together with the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem.' The salvaged books had been used and left during World War II by members of the American armed forces who had conducted religious services in the synagogue while they were stationed in the region. No Jews have lived in Angenrod since 1942."

[Epilogue from *The Way It Was- The Jewish World of Rural Hesse*, Frederick Max Publications, Atlanta, Georgia, 2000.]