

Susanne Theresia Kord, *Lovable Crooks and Loathsome Jews: Antisemitism in German and Austrian Crime Writing Before the World Wars*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2018), pp. 347.

by *Lisa Silverman*

Given the current increase in violent acts against Jews, few could argue that antisemitism remains a powerful and persistent force. And historians, sociologists, and other scholars have already convincingly shown how deeply ingrained antisemitic ideology remains around the world. Less clear, however, is why. To help address this conundrum, S.T. Kord offers a thought-provoking, original approach: studying the relationship between representations of Jews and criminals in criminology, popular literature, newspapers, and other sources of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Austria and Germany. Given that the Nazis labeled Jews as a criminal race, Kord aims to find out whether they inherited a ready-made discourse. Through meticulously researched, in-depth case studies involving celebrated non-Jewish criminals juxtaposed with Jews who were vilified for their transgressions, she shows that explicitly linking individual Jews with criminality was neither widespread nor constant before 1933. However, early popular discourse also established the crucial groundwork for associating Jews with vice – that is, constant, habitual criminality. This foundation ensured that narratives calling for sympathetic criminal characters would only make sense to popular audiences if they were depicted as non-Jews – an omission that points to a more subtle form of antisemitism.

Beginning with an overview of sociological crime theories, Kord argues that early scientific accounts stressed evidence that Jews actually committed fewer violent crimes than non-Jews. Antisemitic attitudes in these sources remained limited to conspiracy theories in fringe publications implicating groups of Jews in plots for global economic domination, ritual murder, and white slavery. Taken together, however, these discussions helped prime audiences for Nazi-era propaganda that portrayed fighting crime as “an act of social self-defense without ethical implications” (p. 57). The book then turns to case studies, beginning with Wilhelm Voigt, a colorful con man who managed to temporarily occupy the Berlin Köpenick city hall in 1906 by convincing others that he was an army Captain. Voigt became a folk hero, a “symbol of resourcefulness, hilarity and humanity pitted against injustice, rigidity, humorlessness, militarism, and unthinking obedience – against everything, in short, that was wrong with Imperial Germany” (p. 62), and his story resonated for decades as fodder for myriad

lighthearted portrayals in popular culture. In contrast, the press widely vilified Tamara von Hervay, who was convicted of bigamy in provincial Austria in 1904, although Kord highlights the fact that the majority of the media's negative depictions of her did not explicitly focus on her Jewish background.

In 1920s Berlin, Franz and Eric Sass rose from poverty to become the very first pop stars of bank robbery with impressive heists and clever schemes that turned them into heroes for outsmarting anonymous, greedy banks and the police. Only after the Nazis passed a law in 1933 against habitual criminals that specifically targeted the Sass brothers were they caught and ultimately executed. Around the same time, however, newspapers reporting on the 1924 Vienna pornography trial of popular writer Hugo Bettauer and his publishing partner Rudolf Olden emphasized Bettauer's Jewish background to buttress their negative depictions. Curiously, however, these same sources passed up the opportunity to denigrate his far less colorful and newsworthy Jewish partner Olden, suggesting a strategic rather than pedantic deployment of antisemitism.

The next section traces the depiction of criminals in popular fiction, as narratives began to show criminal outsiders as repentant and often innocent victims of society. By the decades before World War II, major writers, artists, and filmmakers critiqued society by creating criminal characters who acted as mouthpieces for grand philosophical statements on the human condition. But this trend, which included portraying the era's sex murderers and serial killers as weak and childlike, ended after the Nazis came to power. While crime fiction remained popular, its emphasis shifted away from the likeable criminal to an efficient and competent police force. Still throughout the history of crime fiction during this broad time span, notes Kord, only rarely did authors highlight Jews as criminals.

Kord concludes from her research that Jews were often missing entirely from crime narratives. But while explicit antisemitism appeared only in fringe sources, it is significant that Jewish characters could still never serve broad audiences as admirable, lovable criminals. "As Germany and Austria stumbled from Empire to Republic and from there to dictatorship, the sympathetic criminal became a humanistic self-image of the law-abiding citizen, a symbol of decent 'Germanness,' and simultaneously an accessory to the Nazi crime of assigning the idea of serious criminality to Jews" (p. 234). Kord's plausible conclusion would have been strengthened further had she relied not only on easily identifiable antisemitic words and deeds to gauge audiences' receptiveness to Jewish characters, but also given equal weight to the more subtle ways that Jewish difference inflected

popular culture. For example, early criminologists may have shied away from unsupportable conspiracies about Jews and told the truth about their relatively marginal criminal activity, but by singling Jews out as a separate category, they, too, subtly engaged and perpetuated antisemitism. Moreover, describing press reports that do not explicitly mention Hervay's Jewishness as "neutral" overlooks subtle codes pointing to underlying bigotry against Jews, and especially Jewish women, that scholars have shown was widespread in fin-de-siècle Austria. As Alison Rose pointed out in her 2016 study of Hervay's case, "when reading between the lines, descriptions of her demeanor, appearance, and remarks often betray antisemitic sentiments and embrace stereotypes commonly seen in fin-de-siècle depictions of Jewish women."<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, Kord cites Shulamit Volkov's well-known 1978 study of antisemitism as a cultural code and Hannah Arendt's thoughtful comments on the topic, conceding that antisemitism "is both more subtle and more far-reaching than the press coverage of a few years can capture" and that it involves "an entire culture of perception" (p. 153). But if that is the case, then the explicit antisemitism highlighted in her research only tells part of the story. Distinguishing between the strategic uses of antisemitism in the fin de siècle and interwar years also would have helped buttress a more nuanced argument, since heightened political polarization after 1918 made delineating Jews and non-Jews a more salient force in German and Austrian culture. In Austria in particular, for example, antisemitism was often used to buttress divisions between urban and rural populations.

Kord's rich study is useful in showing that, before the Nazis came to power, ascribing explicit Jewishness to those accused of crimes did not resonate with broad audiences and usually interested only marginal writers while, at the same time, in order for criminals to be portrayed as popular heroes they had to be as non-Jewish (read: German) as possible. Recognizing the role that systemic antisemitism – the kind that operates under the surface and often remains unarticulated – played in supporting these phenomena would have helped even more to illuminate why readers and audiences accepted Jews's symbolic function as perpetrators of habitual, incorrigible crime, or vice, rather than seeing them as individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Rose, *Antisemitism, Gender Bias, and the "Hervay Affair" of 1904*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), p.83.

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