

Irene Aue-Ben-David, *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichtsschreibung im 20 Jahrhundert. Zu Werk und Rezeption von Selma Stern*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2017), pp. 315.

by *Dominique Bourel*

This important book comes from Jerusalem! The author is the very active researcher who heads the Leo Baeck Institute in Israel. Following an earlier work on Selma Stern by Marina Sassenberg,<sup>1</sup> the present volume offers new insight, study of new archival material and a new research undertaking. Selma Stern was outstanding not only in her rereading of the emancipation of the Jews in Germany, but also as a person. The book follows a chronological sequence in Selma Stern's life: a historian at the Academy for the Science of Judaism (1920-1934), Researcher under Hitler (till 1941) and Worker in Exile (till 1981). This enables a wonderful exploration in the workshop of one of the most fascinating historians, female, Jewish, and successful as a researcher. Her work had two focuses: the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia (1925—1971/1975) and a monograph on Jud Süß (1929).

Selma Stern came from a Jewish family of Baden: she was born in 1890 in Kippenheim; her father was a physician. The first female student at the *Grossherzogliches Gymnasium* in Baden Baden, she was one of the first women to earn a Ph.D. in history in Germany. In 1920 she went to Berlin, where at the well-known *Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* she eventually met her husband, the renowned “*Alt Historiker*” Eugen Täubler (1879-1953). In exile in the USA after 1938, following Täubler's death Stern lived in Switzerland and died in Basel in 1981.

History of books (*Werkesgeschichte*) is neither biographic nor an analysis of texts (p.15). The first part of the book is about Stern's work in the *Berlin Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The second part deals with her research under the Nazis till 1941. The third and last part covers her achievement in exile in the USA. It is remarkable that one of the major projects of the academy was concerned with Prussian Jewish politics. We know that the Jews and the Huguenots were two minorities tolerated in this country after 1671 and 1685, respectively, after expulsions from Vienna and from Paris. Two leading Catholic powers expelled

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Sassenberg, *Selma Stern (1890-1981). Das eigene in der Geschichte. Selbstentwürfe und Geschichtsentwürfe einer Historikerin*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

these two groups, thus unwittingly benefitting Prussia (and other lands in the world). Stern began to study in Heidelberg (1909), one of the first universities in Germany to accept women to as free auditors, and subsequently as regular students. She later went on to Munich (1911). Her student research work (1914 nachdr. 1965) was about Anacharsis Clots, a fascinating German figure during the French Revolution. The *Habilitation* was very difficult to obtain: the first *Habilitation* of a woman in Munich at the faculty of philosophy was in...1947! In 1920, Stern was able to plan a large project at the *Akademie* about the Jews in Prussia. The head of the Academy was Eugen Täubler, with whom she had a romantic relationship after 1920. They eventually married in 1927. But Täubler left the academy in 1922 to become a professor of history, specializing in the Greek and Roman Empires, at the University of Zurich. He was later granted a professorship in Heidelberg in 1925, as *Ordinarius für Alte Geschichte*. The academy's new director was the philosopher Julius Guttmann. Stern did her research not only in the very rich archives in Berlin, but also in Halberstadt, Magdeburg, Stettin and Königsberg. An important question was: why and how did the Prussian kings view tolerating the Jews? What was the price the Jews were ready to pay? Where did the civil servants work for and against the Jews in the state apparatus? The aim of the study was influenced by the norms of the German *Wissenschaft* and the well-known *acta borussica*. This entirely new orientation should be examined. The first volume, *Der Preussische Staat und die Juden*, came out in 1925. The author shows that the *Grosse Kurfürst* and his 'modern' staff needed the Jews for the construction of the absolutist state after devastating wars. It is impressive to follow in great detail how the question was elaborated in various offices. Political, economic, and philosophical reasons were presented and disputed. We also see that in some provinces (Halberstadt) it was easier for the Jews. In other cases things were more difficult. Each king wanted to reorganize his administration to make it more efficient. And each administration had new ideas. The *Grosse Kurfürst* began, then came the first king, Friedrich I, "König *in* Preussen" (and not *of* Preussen) who wanted to be involved in the life of new communities. The case of Frederic II is better known, especially his Judeophobic laws and his pragmatic actions. One of the most innovative contributions of Aue-Ben-Davids book is the careful study of the reception of the different volumes as Stern became a highly respected historian and her subject came to occupy center stage at the academy. Between 1925 and 1930, 21 critiques were published, both academic and simply popular. The process of the emancipation was clarified and very well examined. New was also the inscription of Jewish history into Prussian history. More than that, Stern said that the Jews were instrumentalized by the state and the *Kurfürst*. The way was paved for the work of the next king, Friedrich Wilhelm I. She edited

more documents with the help of Dr. Arthur Levinson between 1927 and 1937. Stern wanted to follow the history of the 18th century, where the period of Friedrich Wilhelm I was a setback. The former “pioneers of the economy” had to be supervised and restrained. The burgeoning economy of Prussia was partly a result of the competition between the Jews and the Huguenots. But the Jews and their communities had to be scrutinized: they had to write in German and each community had a watching officer or state servant in charge of its life. But it is clear that the obligation to learn German and to use it was a push factor in favor of acculturation. Before the publication of the second volume, Stern offered her insights in the *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* (1935/36). Between the years 1935-1941 Stern worked on her research for the planned third volume to cover the years 1712-1812. Till 1936, Stern added works in Munich and Düsseldorf. The book also analyzes the position of the archives after 1933. But after 1941 it was forbidden for Jews to visit archives in Germany with the exception of family inquiries. We have to imagine the sepulchral atmosphere in the *Lesesaal* of the Prussian State Archive with only three Jews: Selma Stern, Jacob Jacobson (1888-1968), former director of the *Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden* (1920-1939), and Ernst Poser (1892-1980), an archivist in the State Archiv and coworker of the *acta borussica!* After the war Stern was able to publish the enormous and authoritative 7 volumes, *Der Preussische Staat und die Juden*, Tübingen (1962-1971 with index 1975).

At the same time, in Stuttgart Stern did research on court Jews, who accounted for an essential moment in the history of the emancipation. She discovered the material about the “*Hoffaktor und Finanzienrat*” Joseph Süß Oppenheimer. The *Jud Süß* (1929, 3,000 copies) is also about the difficult relationship of a Jewish servant and the state. The history was tragic, ending with a condemnation and a public burning on February 4, 1738. We know that the case was also the subject of a historical novel by Lion Feuchtwanger (1925, 200,000 copies till 1933!) and then that the case had a dubious fate in the Third Reich. We have recent studies about this contested figure. It is another prehistory of the emancipation with the sad fragrance of catastrophe. Very interesting is also Aue-Ben-David’s contextualization of the “*Jud Süß Effekt*” in the Weimar Republic. Here the history of the reception is once again important. It is the year (1929) of the Moses Mendelssohn celebrations all around Germany and the fall of the Nazis in the *Reichstag*. The central question was now the germanization of the Jews and not only a political administration history. This *Jud Süß* for some was a provocation, while for others it was a “*mene tekel*,” an anticipated cry. The first reception came in 1930, before the worsening of the situation and the fatal year 1933.

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Well documented, very readable, full of new data and challenging ideas, this book is an essential research work in German Jewish historiography, the *Frauenforschung* and the history of the emancipation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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