

Daniel Ristau, *Die Familie Bondi und das »Jüdische«: Beziehungsgeschichte unter dem bürgerlichen Wertehimmel, 1790-1870* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), pp. 611.

by Rotraud Ries

Life is relationships, family life in nuclear and extended families forms a web of relationships. Daniel Ristau makes use of this fact in his study and examines the history of the Bondi family as a history of relationships—and he does so with an innovative research question: the book is not simply about the history of a family that is naturally located in the Jewish cosmos due to its origin and religion. Instead, the author questions *das Jüdische*¹ and differentiates between its presence or non-presence in the age of embourgeoisement. Ristau uses a relational approach to history to structure his study, which he submitted as a dissertation to the Georg August University of Göttingen in 2019 and shortened considerably for the book. The Bondi family (chapter 2.1) can be traced back to the end of the 16th century in the booming Jewish community of Prague, where individual wealthy bearers of the name acquired property. A little later, direct ancestors are mentioned by name. From the second half of the seventeenth century, members of the Bondi family belonged to the wealthy ruling class of the Jewish community, in which they frequently held offices. Economically, they were very successful and well connected, with many men trained as Jewish scholars. The first doctors can be found in the 18th century. There are no sources for the lives of the families, women and children though.

The expulsion of the large Jewish community, including the Bondis, from Prague in 1746 became a benchmark in the family's later memory. Simon Isaac Bondi fled with his family to Dresden, where, after a brief return to Prague in 1748, he settled permanently in the early 1750s. The economic potential of the Saxon residence was promising and probably outweighed the fact that the existence of a Jewish community with a synagogue was not allowed (for a long time). As early as 1754, he was listed as a royal Polish coin supplier. His household included a son-in-law

¹ Ristau transformed the German adjective *jüdisch* (Jewish) into a noun: *das Jüdische* which has different meanings depending on the context. As there is no English pendant I will use the German original.

and four servants in addition to his nuclear family. Ten years later, he was appointed court factor.

All six of Simon Isaac Bondi's children, including one daughter, were able to establish themselves in Dresden, while the grandchildren, particularly the children of Wolf Simon Bondi, married out into other Jewish communities and established branches of the family there. The Bondi family spread—sometimes under different names—besides Dresden to Mainz, Hamburg (Oppenheim) and Altona (Warburg). The study focuses on these two generations and their descendants.

The relational approach to history characterizes the author's methodology (chapter 1.4), which not only examines the interconnectedness but also the disentanglement of persons, groups of persons, things and objects. In the sense of a *histoire croisée* the approach also includes the work of the historian as an entanglement factor. Pragmatism and reflexivity guide the approach to the sources. Ristau examines a large corpus of sources, primarily self-narratives, including well over 900 letters from men and women of the family, and contemporary publications by and about the protagonists, as well as other archival sources.

The author's relational approach to history also characterizes the structure of the work and its main topics. At times though, tensions arise because the structural terms are filled heterogeneously (chapters 2 and 6). There are also topics that do not fit in just one place within the larger structure of the book, such as the private libraries, which are presented as places but would have fitted just as well (or even better?) in the topic of resources.

Chapters three to five provide the core of the (relational-historical) investigation of the Bondi family. In "Practices" (chapter 3), the author focuses on establishing and maintaining contacts, publishing and corresponding as well as disentangling, i.e. breaking off relationships. While these practices of the family network were often based on bourgeois patterns, individual fields such as marriage or publishing in the context of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* show a clear Jewish relevance. In chapter four, Ristau presents resources as prerequisites for webs of relationships and deals with body and soul, assets, education, time, relationships and *das Jüdische* as a resource. In chapter five, he describes spaces and places as nodal points in the web of relationships and examines the source material for spaces of interaction, namely living and business spaces, worlds of books, places of faith,

metropolitan meeting places and spas with an international clientele. As a counterpart to “Beginnings” in chapter two, the account ends in chapter six with “Outlook[s]”. In this chapter, Ristau discusses death as the end of a relationship as well as the family history from 1870, the end of the actual period under investigation, until 1945. Finally—erroneously introduced as chapter seven in the introduction (p. 36)—there are critical reflections on the lines of tradition, the politics of memory and historiography with their clichéd tendencies to attach the label “Jewish” indiscriminately to every person and every group with a certain connection to Jewish origin, culture or religion.

The author presents the results of his study in a short concluding chapter (chapter 7). Literary skillfully he uses again Clara Bondi, his example from the beginning of the book, to present his findings on “whether and in which fields the Bondis and their contemporaries attributed any relevance to *das Jüdische*” (p. 432).

Ristau summarizes his findings in three points (pp. 432-434). (1) “The everyday relevance of *das Jüdische* correlated [...] clearly with individual attitudes towards the Jewish religion.” This was evident among the neo-orthodox Bondis in Mainz and it had effects on networking and disentanglement, for example in the field of urban bourgeois sociability. To a lesser extent, this relevance can also be found among the more conservative Bondis in Dresden, while the conversions in the Hamburg Oppenheim family mark the disappearance of *das Jüdische* in an extreme way. (2) However, the author cannot observe a uniform development—“clear collective interpretations”—within each of the three branches of the family. This was due to individual developments such as “educational paths, everyday work life, gender, generational affiliation” or even radical breaks in religious orientation. *Das Jüdische* was able to recede behind “other reference categories such as bourgeois status or educational ideals,” either selectively or successively and permanently. (3) Finally, “interpretations of *das Jüdische* were highly situational,” “different attributions therefore stood side by side and not infrequently even in apparent contradiction.” Self-interpretations and negotiations of *das Jüdische* in all three branches of the family prove that they were “never just Jews.” Thus, although *das Jüdische* is tangible, it proves to be a “category of attribution and interpretation” that is “liquid and situational.”

At the end of the book, Ristau provides helpful tables that summarize subscriptions, university studies and doctorates, conversion cases and supervisory board positions of the members of the kinship network, while 36 plates illustrate the genealogical connections of the different branches of the Bondi family. The publications of members of the kinship network can be found in the comprehensive bibliography, in which all primary sources, newspapers and research literature that the author made use of are listed. The volume is rounded off with an index of persons and places.

Daniel Ristau's relational history of the Bondi family from 1790 to 1870 presents a well-structured, detailed history of an upper-class family in the age of *embourgeoisement* that puts the question of *das Jüdische* at its center. He achieves this based on remarkable ego-documents and other archival sources. Unfortunately, he does not subject his sources to any critical assessment. He has convincingly mastered the rich material and research and offers his readers an example of resilience, potential and differentiation in the Central European Jewish elite at the beginning of the modern era. Ristau provides us with a significant contribution to the field of research into Jewish bourgeoisie.

Addressing the issue of *das Jüdische* in a family during a period of transition into bourgeois society is innovative, important and the great merit of this study. However, its significance goes far beyond this and formulates a prompt to further researchers to deal with and qualify the category of *das Jüdische* more consciously—regardless of the period in question. Doing so, researchers can add new perspectives to allegedly well-known historical developments.

Rotraud Ries, Johanna-Stahl-Center for Jewish History and Culture, Würzburg

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