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The fate of a German Jewish family, 1934.

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THE FATE OF A GERMAN-JEWISH FAMILY'S
Based on Lion Feuchtwanger's New Novel of
Present-Day Nazi Germany, "The Oppermanns"

By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver
At
The Temple
On
Sunday Morning, March 25, 1934.

Lion Feuchtwanger, when he wrote his last book, "The Oppermanns", might well have had in mind the chapter from the Book of Lamentations which I read this morning, the tragedy of defeat, of humiliation, of joy departed, of life from which happiness and hope departed, of life driven down to defeat and degradation. And in closing his chronicle of disaster, he might have taken, as I believe he did take, the theme of this last song which you just heard, the prayer of faith, of trust in the Almighty, of confidence in the future. (Quote)

Lion Feuchtwanger who wrote those monumental works, Josephus, Power, which some of you might have read, has now added another important work on a Jewish theme. But this time the theme is a contemporary one and this time the author is not entirely removed from the scene of his own writing and from the flock of his own people. Feuchtwanger is himself at present in exile from Germany. And the wrath of this present mad regime is visited upon his own home and upon his property in Germany.

The story of the Oppermanns is a story of what happened to one German family in novel form -- of what happened to one German family in the last year and a half. In this typical German family the whole spiritual tragedy is enacted in Nazi Germany. "The Oppermanns" is at one and the same time a chronicle, an expose, an indictment, a call to battle.

The Oppermanns are a cultured substantial family of upper class German Jews. There are three brothers. Each one has made a mark in the world. Each one succeeded in his own sphere of activity. They are men who have lived in security, solid citizens, men who feel themselves completely at home where they and their forebears have lived for many generations. The House of Oppermann was established in Berlin according to this story. They have a grandfather who built a large furniture establishment which in the course of years grew and prospered.

There were three brothers: Martin was the head of a business establishment; Edgar, a very famous throat specialist and head of a Berlin Hospital; Gustav, a cultured man of the world, an author of note. These men and their families pursued the even tenor of their ways, honored, welcomed and respected by their fellow men.

The story of The Oppermanns opens in 1932 when clouds are gathering. The Nazis had been at work for twelve years carrying on poisonous propaganda among the people. There was a menacing tension in the air. The Oppermanns feel the oncoming storm. But their minds refuse to believe it. They have so much faith in Germany, the Germany in which they had moved and had lived, the Germany of their friends, of poets and philosophers and scholars, the Germany of music. Their minds will not credit that Germany is endangered by this barbarism. And yet, though their minds will not credit this, their

hearts are filled with misgivings. Their misgivings become certainties as the story unfolds in 1932-33. When Hitler and his party come into power disasters are visited upon them.

Martin is the business man. He is head of the furniture establishment which his grandfather started. He has built up a very successful mercantile establishment and has been an honorable man. In 1932, the Jewish business men of Berlin begin to realize the importance of merging their businesses with gentile firms. They feel that they must hide themselves before the oncoming storm by merging with some gentile firm. Martin, proud of his family traditions, his achievements, hates to do this. Finally, however, he is compelled to come to terms with a competitor who hates him and who humiliates him. The competitor presents humiliating terms for merging the business which Martin is compelled to accept. He must now subsist on the tolerance of his former competitor. Only the original store is permitted to retain its name for a time and then Martin is compelled to swallow the bitterness of the boycott of last April and Martin is compelled to endure the indignities of one of those infamous Brown Houses of the Nazis into which he was thrown because he refused to discharge from his employ his Jewish workers. This solid citizen, this proud man of position is submitted to all the manhandling, the coarse and brutal treatment of the Nazis in a Brown House before he is allowed to return home.

But the real tragedy comes into his life through his son Berthold. Berthold is a likable lad of seventeen who is attending

high school. He is a favorite pupil. Berthold has a fine mind and is of excellent character. His old school master suddenly dies and a new school master appears on the scene. The new master is a typical militant Prussian Nazi and of course a Jew hater. Berthold had undertaken to write an oration which each member of his class was expected to write once a year and he selected for his subject: "Humanism and the Twentieth Century." This subject does not at all appeal to the Nazi school master and he compels Berthold to select another subject "Arminius the German."

Berhold undertakes to write this oration, but being an honest lad and having honestly searched through the material, he presents his oration, praising Arminius, reciting this war with the Romans conscientiously, but nevertheless not accepting its significance.

He is sharply criticized by the master. The master says that Berthold is not a Good German. Berthold resents this criticism unjustly leveled against him and replies that he is as good a German as he is. Berthold is ordered to recant and to apologize. He is confused and harassed. He does not know why he should recant. He presented the facts to the best of his knowledge. He consults his friends and family. They advise him to recant and to apologize. But his heart and his mind will not let him. In the meantime the Nazis come into power. Berthold is threatened with expulsion unless he apologizes and recants. His schoolmates begin to desert him. The Nazi spirit has swept through the school. This poor lad, harassed,

confused, troubled and humiliated, is finally driven to commit suicide.

Martin, the father, mourns the death of his only son, his only child. And something of the past comes back to him. He rents his garments and to his lips come the ancient words of the Kaddish. This is the story of Martin. He is the first.

There is Edgar. Edgar is an eminent physician. He is one of the ten great physicians in Germany. Edgar is a scientist and is absorbed entirely in science and research. He has heard of the crazy doctrines about race and nationalism but makes very light of it. He knows that these theories are fantastic and mad and of course untrue, and therefore negligible. His attitude is that of a scientist. Edgar is attacked in the Nazi press in an effort to dislodge him. He is attacked villainously by insinuations and innuendo. He is accused of performing dangerous operations in a third class hospital and that he is seeking prestige and has no hesitancy to sacrifice Christian blood in his murderous experiments. Of course Edgar ignores this. He doesn't even notice it. But the time soon comes when he can no longer ignore it. Even his patients in the hospital are affected by it. Edgar decides to prosecute these German newspapers. His lawyer and friend advises him to do nothing so foolish. The Nazis are now in power. Nowhere in Germany would his case receive a fair trial. This eminent man, internationally reputed physician is compelled to witness with his own eyes a detachment of Brown Shirts come into the hospital and discharge twenty-four Jewish doctors and he himself is compelled uncerimoniously to leave the hospital never to return.

Edgar goes to Paris. Though his plight is not like that of Martin, he is nevertheless an up-rooted man. He must start life over again in a new world. This is Edgar.

The third brother is Gustav. Gustav is a cultured, refined man of the world. He lives comfortably among his books. He has a fine home and an assured income. Life is kind to him. He is engaged on a monumental biography of Lessing. Edgar has a great number of non-Jewish friends. He indulges in the pastime of laughing at stories circulated. He particularly laughs at Hitler's book "Mein Kampf", its impossible, incredible German, its boorish style. Gustav refuses to be frightened or intimidated by what is going on about him.

He knows that the German people are sound at heart. Gustav signs a manifesto along with other leaders against introducing barbarism into the public life of Germany. From that moment he is a marked man. The Nazis begin to attack him viciously. His friends begin to slip away. A cold atmosphere greets him wherever he goes. And then when the Reichstag fire takes place, his close friend and legal adviser consels him to flee from Germany. Gustav leaves Germany and moves to Switzerland and determines to pass his life quietly there. But life will not permit him to live quietly. Life takes hold of him. Through friends he learns the ghastly story of what happening in Germany, of the thousands who were killed and the tens of thousands who were imprisoned.

Gustav suddenly feels as though he has a mission in the world. He must go back to Germany. He must awaken the people. He must arouse

them. The millions of Germany cannot be kept in darkness of what is going on in their midst. They cannot be permitted to be in the dark about the lawlessness, the brutality and the viciousness of this new corrupt regime. He must go back.

With the aid of a false passport, he does go back. It is a rather quixotical mission he has engaged in. He wants to do something but doesn't know what to do. He is arrested and is sent to one of those concentration camps and is subjected to the characteristic treatment of those concentration camps. By the time he is released, he is a broken, crushed helpless invalid.

And we find him as an invalid somewhere on the Riviera, hanging on by the slender threads of life, comforting himself with the thought that while his mission failed, he had ~~tx~~ pursued the mission nevertheless.

And so here is the story of the Oppermanns, the merchant, the doctor, the writer. It is the tragedy of Israel so often repeated in so many ages, in so many lands. It is the story of Israel in the Diaspora with all its insecurity, subject so frequently to the whim and will of the leaders.

The story of the Oppermanns is an exposé of the futility of assimilation and of their fond hope that the Era of Emancipation has finally solved the problem of the Jew in the world. All these Oppermanns, Martin, Edgar, Gustav, their wives and children all want Germany. But Germany doesn't want them. The solution does not lie entirely within the hands of the Jews.

And one of the greatest tragedies of the book is that when misfortune came on the Oppermanns, they did not possess the inner strength to sustain themselves, to carry themselves through their darkness. They were not strong with the faith of their people and when they were finally made homeless, they were doubly homeless. They were souls that wandered in space, hopeless and homeless.

There are other characters in the Oppermann story. There is the story of the brother-in-law of the Oppermanns, Jaques Lavendal. He is a different type altogether. He is a realist. He never underestimated the strength of anti-Semitism in the country and adjusts himself spiritually and intellectually to meet the situation. His life was centered around his Jewish world, in his faith and when the storm sweeps over, he does not go under.

There is Ruth, the daughter of the Professor, a seventeen year old girl who has been made keenly aware of the prejudices against the Jews. She is a proud and high-spirited girl. She will not submit to it. Her reaction is different from that of her parents, not hiding and denying, but rather a proud assertion of Jewishness. Ruth races the world as a Jewess. She learns Hebrew and studies medicine so that ultimately she may go to Palestine.

The book reveals clearly to every reader the menace for all the precious values; the menace of Jewish life which is to be found in Fascism, in all forms of reaction which are sweeping all over the world. As you read the book, you become impressed with the fact

that as far as the Jews are concerned, there is only one thing to do: to fight relentlessly, persistently with all our energies in behalf of the democratic institutions and the traditions of liberalism. Whenever Fascism comes into power, it spells doom to the Jewish group. Fascism is reaction. Fascism throws us back to pre-revolutionary days, the Middle Ages. Dictatorships of the Fascist type, mean for the Jews, a return to that condition of servitude and rightlessness which was his in the Middle Ages.

And this I offer to my public friends and public colleagues who are sometimes tempted to join hands with industrialists who are not yet Fascist but who in order to protect their vast interests will stop at nothing even if it means the destruction of democratic institutions. Do not beguile yourselves. German industrialists in an effort to trade, financed Hitler and utilized anti-semitism as a means of inflaming and inciting the population and if given a chance, these same groups will do the same things again. Be careful that you don't join those forces in a foolish and fond effort to protect your own business interests.

The story of the Oppermanns is the testament of Jewish life in the second quarter of the Twentieth century. Is the latest testament. It is a sad and tragic testimony of what can happen in a civilized world in the Twentieth century. When you read the book, try to keep in mind the verses of the psalm which you heard this morning. (Quote) From Lamentations. Look ahead, realistically and fearlessly.

The Oppermanns

Lion Feuchtwanger

Y.L. 7. Now an epile from G. has written another.
This time theme contemporaneous - & author not himself removed
Story in novel form of what happened to a typ. J. family
In it whole tragedy - is mirrored - the human, the tragedy.
It is at one & same time - a chronicle, an expose, an indictment
a call to battle!

4. Oppermann - a cultured, substantial family of upper class G. Jew
3 Brothers - each - successful - lives secure, solid citizens
At home in G. where their forebears.
Grandfather - Berlin - 50
Martin - head
Edgar - famous throat specialist -
Gustav - writer, note.

3. Not follow even time - No special story
Story open in 1932 - clouds are gathering - Nazi 12 years
Atmosphere was menacing - Terrorism fears
Feel oncoming storm - yet refuse to believe
Too much faith in G. - They knew the G. & art. South
① Yet tho their minds - their hearts misgivings
Misgivings become black certitude - as story unfolds -
and fatal days of early 1933.
Disasters are visited - breaking & scattering - bringing
tragedy into their lives

4. Martin is the Business man -

Need for merging with Gentile firms - Corruptible - Nazi
Humiliated - Old, honored name - proud record destroyed
Must now exist on tolerance & former competitors

① only original store -

- Swallow bitterness & Boycott

- Indignity & "Green Horse" - Coarsely treated -
man-handled, beaten & sent home -

5. His son Berthold - 17 y. H. School grad. juvenile perfect -
"Humanism in the 20c" - in keeping with his interests H. G. G. G.
New Master - Typical militant American, Nazi

"Arminius the German" -

Rejection of Nazism - Confused Troubled Persuaded

Nazi can win power - Forces discussed

School-mates desert him - Isolated

He must recant - His heart remains -

Suicide -

His peers further - abandoners - murders -

6. Edgar - eminent - 1 of Ten -

absorbed - Had heard of crazy race - Servile

attacked - to deride him - accused Ignorance

But soon - could not ignore - Even seek

Decides to prosecute - advised Nazi -

24 doctors -

Paris

7. Gustav - cultured, refined man & used -
lived comfortably among his books five-beer
assured machine -
'Jerning'
- (1) Meets with non-Jewish friends - Laughs 'Elder & Zion'
"Hein Kambly" - stupidity, wicked, distorted sense
 - (2) will not be frightened - "People are sound at heart"
 - (3) Signs manifesto - as, intro. of Volauwren into pub. life
marked man
 - (4) Nazi press attacks -
 - (5) Freuer slip away - at club
 - (6) Reichstag Fire - advised to flee
 - (7) Switzerland - gets reports - white shock
tale 3000 - radiation
 - (8) Met, long-pung man stirred - Mission
 - (9) Returns - false passport - "to anathem"
quixotic - no program - Driven
 - (10) Arrested - Concentration Camp -
 - (11) Zik kl

8. This is story of Opp - the merchant - the doctor - the writer
 - the Jews
- (1) This tragedy of Israel - so often repeated
 - (2) It is story of .. in Diaspora - wisdom
 - (3) ... Exposure of publicity of assimilation

- (4) all these people wanted G. — Gen. did not want them
(5) no inner light — homeless in 2 fold

9. Sam character

Jaque Lavendell

10. Ruth —

- 11). Story reveals menace of Reaction & Fascism to J.
(1) only hope — to fight — Bur. Men.
(2) our destiny is linked up —

