

Between Cross and Crescent? Jewish National Narratives of Al-Andalus

In 1937, Ernst Sommer and Hermann Kesten were in a similar position. The former wrote on his new novel *Botschaft aus Granada* in Karlovy Vary/Karlsbad,¹ the latter shared a common flat with the famous authors Joseph Roth und Heinrich Mann in Nizza, working on his latest book *Ferdinand und Isabella*.² The world around them was in a state of utter turbulency. While France and Great Britain desperately tried to keep the peace, Germany under the Nazi Regime was blowing the war-trumpets. Sommer and Kesten both identified themselves with the German language but had all the reasons to fear living under the new government. Restrictions against the Jewish population became fiercer every day, and the expansionist tone in Hitler's rhetoric emphasized the danger of not only residing in Germany but also in the neighboring countries. critical Jewish authors, like Sommer and Kesten, even had to leave continental Europe after the events that were about to happen.

The contemporary literary scene witnessed an upsurge in historical novels from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. Although short-lived, this movement revitalized a dying genre. Historical novels had been immensely popular during the early nineteenth century, facilitating a national incentive but had ever since, except an ephemeral comeback during the fin de siècle, lost its high financial and prestigious potential. So why would authors suddenly re-establish the shopworn genre with its cheesy romances and pseudo-historical scenery?

The newly gained popularity developed mainly in Spain, Italy, and Germany, countries under a fascist government. Here, the historical novel appeared to be the perfect tool to recreate the image of the national hero. This new wave of novels favored stories like the fall of Constantinople or the conquest of Granada. The authors proposed a dualistic chronology, first depicting the downfall of Western culture before the old walls of Byzantium and then its ensuing reparation on the Iberian Peninsula. The main narrative was the victory of a superior Europe against its supposed, continental opponents Africa and Asia on the shores of the Mediterranean. This narrative implied racial categorizations, underlining a compartmentalizing of Mediterranean and Oriental inferior races. Such stories were instrumentalized to justify diverse colonial undertakings on the Balkans, in the Aegean Sea, and Northern Africa. Germany's interest, so the general propagandistic consensus of the historical novels, would propel a unified Europe to new power, defending its borders against encroachments from the East.

Not all authors shared this jingoistic sentiment. Sommer and Kesten endeavored to position themselves in opposition to the emerging fascist formulations of European supremacy. These writers tried to craft an alternative narrative of the past and thus the present. However, to accomplish a defeat of the prevalent story of victorious Christian Europe on the Mediterranean waves, they had to fall back on the same weapons as used by their counterparts.

Both books, *Botschaft aus Granada* and *Ferdinand und Isabella*, rate as historical novels, since they inform the reader about the tragic fall of Granada, rendering it a disaster to be bemoaned instead of a triumph for Europe. In place of focusing on the martial conflicts surrounding the war, they chose to stage the *Alhambra Edict* as the essential event of the year 1492. After the finalization of their conquest, the Catholic Kings Isabella and Ferdinand decided to evict all Jews from their jurisdiction, using the inquisition as a 'totalizing' institution.

¹ Ernst Sommer, *Botschaft aus Granada* (Leipzig and Mährisch Ostrau: 1937).

² Hermann Kesten, *Ferdinand und Isabella* (Amsterdam: 1936).

By making this policy and the connected persecutions of Spanish Jewry the centerpiece of their novels, Sommer and Kesten put themselves in a long literary tradition. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, German-speaking, Jewish authors had used this story to oppose a German, national narrative, while carving out an alternative form of identity. Writing historical novels became not only a way to raise the voice of an ethnic-religious minority, it also functioned as a weapon in the discourse over the past. Novels like *Botschaft aus Granada* and *Ferdinand und Isabella* equally served to change the perception of history as they were used to criticize the present. This narrative tradition, which Sommer and Kesten were following, is often simply referred to as *Sephardism*, a combative myth like Orientalism.

***Sephardism* – The Story of a People**

The birth of *Sephardism* at the beginning of the nineteenth century was no coincidence. After the Napoleonic regime had left the German states, its inclusive policy towards Jewry was soon to be revoked. In the dire economic situation, a strong resentment rose towards minorities who supposedly took all the best spots in the state's bureaucracy and the international market. The amassed fury unloaded itself eventually in 1819, when the brutal *Hep-Hep-Aufstände*, a violent pogrom against the Jewish lower middle class, destroyed many shops and family homes. The authorities would stand by as the riots made their way through German towns.³

Continually, Jewish professors had to leave their posts at universities, clergymen their emplacements in the hierarchy of the state. An alternative to the loss in prestige and financial income was the conversion to Christianity and assimilation into German society. While this step was taken by many, others rejected this option.⁴

In Poland, the mythical Chassidim-movement found many followers. They proposed a return to religious roots as a solution to the current precarious situation surrounding Jewish livelihood and identity. Their rabbis formulated new religious rules and a mythical, historical outlook on the presence that separated Jewdom from the rest of society, preserving what was believed to be their inherent way of life.⁵

A mythical return to origins was not a solution to the Jewish bourgeoisie, who populated the German cities. This social stratum interfered with global commerce, took part in a transnational culture of art, and maintained daily contact with non-Jewish people. Cutting their connections and confining themselves to their closest community would have been harmful to their social and economic capital, let alone their self-understanding as high-class citizens. Besides, they considered the mythical Chassidim-movement with a rather derogative gaze, creating a special form of racial discrimination because of its Polish origins.⁶

Sephardism proposed itself as a middle way between complete assimilation and utter seclusion. In this context, Al-Andalus advanced to become a utopian myth that served as a wishful state but also a model to live after. The Moorish kingdoms on the medieval Iberian Peninsula were and are often said to have witnessed an outstanding amount of reciprocal tolerance. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish intellectuals were ostensibly able to enter harmonious cooperation that facilitated marvelous deeds in economy and science alike. Jewish, nineteenth-

³ Moshe Zimmermann, "Die Hep-Hep-Unruhen in Hamburg. Ludolf Holsts Schrift 'Über das Verhältnis der Juden zu den Christen in den Handelsstädten,'" *Hamburger Schlüsseldokumente zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte*, 09.03.2017, 31.03.2021, <https://juedische-geschichte-online.net/beitrag/jgo:article-190#section-1>.

⁴ Shlomo Avineri, "The Tale of Two Book Burnings. Heine's Warning in Context," (lecture for the CEU's Nationalism Studies Program and Jewish Studies Program, CEU, Budapest, March 13, 2014).

⁵ John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* (Princeton: 2016), 8.

⁶ Efron, *German Jewry*, 8.

century authors repeatedly evoke the great names of philosophers and artists like Juda Ha-Lewi, Maimonides, or Abraham Ibn Esra. The enlightened minds of *Sepharad* were staged as leading lights to be emulated and became the idols of the *Haskala*, the Jewish enlightenment movement. Their works supposedly proved a Jewish adherence to Western culture, legitimizing a nation amongst the others. Authors tried to show that if tolerance was achieved, a unified society without (religious) frontiers could reach a nearly heavenlike state of being.⁷

But, as all things, also the chimerical world of Al-Andalus had to come to an end. Starting with various persecutions in the fourteenth century, the ostensibly harmonious cohabitation of the three monotheistic confessions was terminated in 1492 by the eviction of the Jews. This traumatic event symbolized a final cut between a Spanish, but also European, and a Jewish community. Sephardist authors of the nineteenth century saw it as the tragic end of a utopian world and as a lost chance for prodigious cooperation. As painful as this imagined separation from Europe might have been, it bore the possibility to formulate a new identity.⁸

In nineteenth-century literature, Jewdom became the target of an orientalized Othering, referring to it as ‘Hebräer’, ‘Israelite’, and ‘Orientalen’. ‘The Jew’ received a dubious reputation, because he was seen as somewhat European, Mediterranean, Asian, and African at the same time. According to various authors, he would shift his identity according to the ever-changing tides of history to follow treacherously the side that promised the most benefits.⁹

Sephardic authors tried to reappropriate this pejorative form of Othering. Through narrating Al-Andalus as a utopian space, home to cosmopolitan and intellectual Jews, they positioned their heritage as being semi-oriental, semi-European. Thus, working between the lines, adhering to neither side of the Mediterranean dichotomy, turned from being a racial slur to a prosperous self-marketing. The notions of Al-Andalus and *Sepharad* created a European Orient that was, according to Sephardic authors, the precursor of modern enlightenment. Being Jewish meant being part of a nation amongst nations, with equal if not superior rights to terms like modernity.¹⁰

However, Sephardism also allowed multiple national affiliations. Revitalizing the imagined cosmopolitanism of Al-Andalus, Jews had the possibility to feel a strong connection to a Sephardi community and a French or German identity simultaneously. This special form of nationalism, which facilitates the possibility of multiple adherences, was adaptable for everyday life of an urban bourgeoisie. The new narrative created a clear frontier towards the rest of society but at the same time opened its gates for free interaction with non-Sephardis. This was essential to a community who was not able to rely on a national state, where avoiding the supposedly foreign would have been possible, at least according to imagination. Albeit being without a physical nation of their own, participants in Sephardi memory politics could, instead, refer to a temporal space on the Iberian Peninsula similar to the southern Levant.¹¹

The proponents of the *Sephardism*-movement started to promulgate and market its ideas in various ways. Members of the Jewish community began researching their genealogies, following their pedigrees back to old *Sepharad*. The households of families with a Sephardi identity became increasingly decorated with orientalized dishes, pictures, and potpourri. Sciences like folklore studies and history did their part in establishing the idea of a continuity

⁷ Susannah Heschel, “German Jewish Scholarship on Islam as a Tool for De-Orientalizing Judaism,” *New German Critique* 117 (2012): 91–107.

⁸ Jonathan Ray, *After Expulsion. 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry* (New York and London: 2013).

⁹ Andrea Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus. Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: 2005), 203.

¹⁰ Efron, *German Jewry*, 14.

¹¹ Efron, *German Jewry*, 14.

between the old medieval Jewry and the community of the present. The *Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden* was founded, the historian Heinrich Graetz wrote his extensive historiography *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, and the revered orientalist Ignaz Goldzieher analyzed religious, oriental roots.¹²

The movement influenced households and academic writing-rooms alike but would further facilitate pan-Jewish sentiment. The *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, stationed in Paris, disseminated a huge amount of Sephardi literature, making France the nineteenth-century center of *Sephardism*. This had not only a centralizing power towards the closest neighboring countries like Germany or Spain. The exceedingly colonialist aspirations of France bolstered a Jewish cosmopolitanism that would take its influence in the Northern African territories and the Ottoman Empire.¹³ The colonial apparatus was often undecided if the Jews living, for example, in the Maghreb could be considered to be European, while their Muslim compatriots were denied this status without further ado. While still considering them as somewhat inferior to their French counterparts, the *Alliance* made a strong case for African Jews to gain French citizenship and were eventually successful, as the *Décret Crémieux* of 1870 proves.¹⁴

The ensuing colonialist strategy of the identity-generating organization aimed at education and protection. Schools and publishing houses were constructed all over the known world and instructed to raise faithful Jews that would identify themselves with a centralized, national corpus. In exchange, Jewish authors and lawyers produced an outcry throughout the European press whenever colonialist policies were seen as discriminatory and brutal towards the local Jewish population, which they often were.¹⁵

An essential part of both educational and protective practices was thus literature. The literature of *Sephardism*, being published in French, German, Yiddish, and other languages, enjoyed broad propagation during the nineteenth century. The various poems, plays, and novels were continually translated, which allowed their publication in various countries at the same time. Famous authors like the Philippon brothers or Heinrich Heine repeatedly used their pens to create a Sephardic identity but also to denounce antisemitism connected to national thinking.¹⁶

Sommer and Kesten, over half a century later, followed in their footsteps. Although being targeted by antisemitic regulations, the commemoration of Al-Andalus stayed strong in the Jewish community during the 1930s. Museum exhibitions, novels, historiographies, and theater kept the memory of events like the Iberian expulsion alive, because they were essential to the cohesion of a Sephardic community.¹⁷ Sommer contributed to this formulation of a nation amongst nations. However, the incentive was not only to create a shared identity but also to criticize national metanarratives and their entailed fascist implications.

¹² Efron, *German Jewry*, 165–166.

¹³ Hélène Guillon, “Les feuilletons dans le Journal de Salonique,” in *Les Sépharades en littérature. Un parcours millénaire*, ed. Esther Benbassa (Paris: 2005), 107–120.

¹⁴ Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Dreyfus in the Sahara. Jews, Trans-Saharan Commerce, and Southern Algeria under French Colonial Rule,” in *France Overseas. Studies in Empire and Decolonization*, ed. James D. Le Sueur and Tyler Stovall (Lincoln: 2016), 265–292, here 266.

¹⁵ Ernest Schonfield, “Heine and Convivencia. Coexistence in Muslim Spain,” *Oxford German Studies* 47, no. 1 (2018): 35–50, here 45.

¹⁶ Efron, *German Jewry*, 166 and 176.

¹⁷ Jean-Christophe Attias and Jane Marie Todd, “Isaac Abravanel. Between Ethnic Memory and National Memory,” *Jewish Social Studies* 2, no. 3 (1996): 137–155, here 144.

Ernst Sommer – A message from Granada from 1492 to 1937

Born in 1888, Ernst Sommer grew up in the small k. u. k. town of Ihlava/Iglau in what is today known as the Czech Republic. He started studying Law in Vienna in 1907 and received his doctorate in 1912. After working for a short time at a chancellery, he was drafted to fight in the First World War. During the 1920s, he began to write short stories in German, joined the social democrats in Karlovy Vary/Karlsbad, and even published a journal called *Die Provinz*. Being a member of the small-town intelligentsia, he started taking an interest in history and eventually the writing of historical novels. While they were saturated with rich and detailed descriptions of past events, they equally had a contemporary message.¹⁸

In his book, Sommer described the singular destinies of diverse Sephardic Jews during the events of 1492. Although the conquest of Granada plays an important role in his novel, he preferred to focus on the Alhambra Edict. The historical novel provided him with the possibility to bring the expulsion of the Jews from Spain to the forefront, drawing a direct connection between the Spanish invasion of the last Moorish kingdom and the internal totalization of a Catholic society.

Sommer revitalized the historical figures witnessing the events of 1492. The proper names of the various Jewish protagonist used in his novel must have been known to the Jewish community that identified itself with *Sepharad*. Isaak Abravanel¹⁹ stands out as a legendary personality, assuming the position of a charismatic leader in times of peril. Abravanel did not receive this status without personal involvement since in his chronicle, he positioned himself as a supplementary Moses in the story of the second diaspora.²⁰ Modern memory further influenced this narrative tradition and Abravanel's fame started growing instead of decreasing. Books, exhibitions, and monuments were created to remember the hero of yore who supposedly saved the Jewish people from the aggression of the Catholic Kings. Notably, Benzion Netanyahu, the father of the current Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, wrote a national historiography on the famous savior-figure. In his interpretation, Abravanel must be accused of not leading the Jewish people as a closed corpus to Israel, while other historians or authors lauded his time-gaining strategy, procuring his compatriots three additional months to pack their belongings.²¹ Thus, although sharing a national incentive, narratives still differ. Sommer depicted Abravanel as a wise, not perfect, but heroic man that had desperately tried to convince the Spanish kings to forego their plan.

Another Jewish figure of interest represents Juan Garcia. He had been accused by Torquemada to have killed an innocent child at La Guardia, a myth that is still known (and honored) in the twenty-first century. The myth became one of the many tales of ritual murders putatively conducted by Jews against innocent, Christian children. This global trend connects the towns of Norwich, Trento, and Rinn (Tirol), demonstrating the broadly spread popularity of this trope. Most of the time, no Jews were present during the first accusations of ritual murder, which made a trial against the suspected culprits but also a possible refusal of the assumptions impossible.²² In *Botschaft aus Granada*, however, the innocent artisan Juan Garcia

¹⁸ Archiv Bibliographia Judaica (Ed.), "Sommer, Ernst," in *Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren. Band 19*, (Berlin: 2012), 280–284.

¹⁹ Here I am following the spelling of Ernst Sommer himself. The same person is also known under *Abarbanel*. Probably, the different versions are connected to the interchangeability of *b* and *v* in Spanish and Ladino sources.

²⁰ Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition. Defense, Dissent and Dialogue* (Albany: 2001).

²¹ Attias and Todd, "Isaac Abravanel," 145–147.

²² Judith Dengler, "Die tirolische Legende vom „Anderl von Rinn“. Andreaskult und Wallfahrtskirche," *Historia Scribere* 10 (2018): 211–240.

represents an available target for accusations. When Torquemada accuses him of the vicious crime, well-knowing that the predicament is false, he endeavors not to judge a single person, but a whole people.²³

Sommer's Abraham Senoir and Luis Santangel stand for a third part of the Sephardic community. They propose complete assimilation to Spanish society as a response to the new restrictions. Instead of preserving their religion and identity, they try to keep wealth and social connections. Sommer describes these semi-voluntary conversos with a benevolent gaze by understanding their motivation and arguments. In the end, however, they stand in stark contrast to the principal model of the novel; Isaak Abravanel who rather leaves his home-country than abandon his Jewish religion. History, so Sommer, would demonstrate that exile was preferable to assimilation, although being connected to incipient hardship.

The protagonist of Sommer's book is Juan Fonseca. His father had converted to Christianity but reneged on his deathbed. Desperately, Fonseca tries to keep his late father's 'eccentric behavior' a secret and even befriends the feared inquisitor Torquemada along the way. Eventually, Fonseca acknowledges his 'real identity', being a Jew, and returns to his community to flee with them from the coasts of Al-Andalus. The name Fonseca belonged to a couple of personalities in early modern Spain, including inquisitors, bishops, and noblemen, but no historical record converges with the Sommer's description. Although mostly adhering to original names, the author adapted a certain volatility in the use of proper names; a peculiarity that historical novels are prone to.²⁴

Most of the book is organized in a dialogic structure between various discourse-participants that contemplate the frontiers of being Jewish, being Christian, or neither. The existentialist nature of this quest can be drawn, for example, from the quarrels of the Sephardic community over the conundrum of *conversos* should still be accepted as full Jews or if they had forfeited their identity by converting to Christianity. In an initial conversation, the Granadian Rabbi Ibn Danan elucidates with multiple reasons why the *Anussim*²⁵ stay Jewish even after their coerced *auto-da-fé*. Firstly, the motivation of fear for one's own and one's family's life cannot suffice as the ground for an intrinsic conversion. Secondly, a man that has received the true teachings of the holy writings is not able to succumb to the false belief and thus baptism remains an empty ritual. Thirdly, even the sinful Israel continues to be Israel. The words of Ibn Danan find the agreement of his fellow discussants, making Jewish identity a collective concept that includes renegades and disallows desertion.²⁶

Discussions like these become more combative when being directed towards the Catholic kings or their religious agents, the inquisitors. In this vein, Abravanel explains to King Ferdinand:

'Your majesty knows that one is subdued by his heritage. Blood is stronger than penance and prayers. Jewry is not just a costume, it is flesh.' Isaak Abravanel thought about the hybrid existence of the Conversos, who had to constantly change attire and attitude. [...] During the evening, hat, belt, rapier, and rosary fell to the floor. One tore the Western whitewash from one's face. The shoulders disengaged themselves from the ruling nobleman's posture. One was again a creature of the East, a servant of unremitting laws, which perhaps furloughed but never released. [...] Can water eradicate human thinking or memory?'²⁷

²³ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 193–194.

²⁴ *Indice Biográfico de España, Portugal e Iberoamérica*, (Berlin and Boston: 2012), 2103.

²⁵ The Hebrew term for *conversos*.

²⁶ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 40–44.

²⁷ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 22–23: My own translation: Eure Hoheit weiß, daß man seiner Abstammung unterworfen bleibt. Das Blut ist stärker als Bußübungen und Gebete. Das Judentum steckt nicht bloß im Kostüm, sondern mitten im Fleisch.' Isaak Abravanel dachte an das Zwitterdasein der Conversos, die unaufhörlich Kleid und Haltung

Sommer used this monolog to transmit his own beliefs through the old heroic persona of Abravanel. In his interpretation, the Jews can change their identity on the surface, staging a performance to adapt to the local costumes. They can bear ‘hat, belt, rapier, and rosary’, signifiers of accomplished *Spanishness*, but when returning to their private sphere, they retransition into a ‘creature of the East’ by ridding themselves of the ‘Western whitewash’. The Jewish population, hereby, acts out a certain play, which it has to follow to survive in a hostile and quantitative superior society. The minority reacts to the restrictive intolerance of the authorities by adapting to their laws, habits, and religions. However, a person stays intrinsically the same, making ethnic and religious borders unpassable. Additionally, the Hebrew would stay an oriental, according to Sommer, although they pretend to be Westerners. While Abravanel speaks out in favor of a Sephardic identity, these arguments can also be used against his compatriots, as the author shows in his novel by giving space to antisemitic accusations. Torquemada confronts Abravanel:

„You will say that you were in this land a thousand years, maybe longer. That is without meaning. Even if your ancestors had immigrated ten thousand years ago, you still would not have grown together with any meadow in this land. Endlessly, you must be ahead of the big masses, and if it is just your law. The Romans did not manage to deal with you. That you did not want to sacrifice to their Gods was clearly laudable. But in your damned arrogance, you distanced yourselves from them. Your desert rule was more important to you than to coexist with Romans and Goths. Already the fact that you always got along better with the infidels than with us proves that you belong there where the infidels are coming from.“²⁸

The antisemitic Torquemada concedes that the supposed proclivity of the Jews to exclude themselves from the general society has had its advantages, not being misguided by heathenism. Nonetheless, he also argues that their secluding rites made them arrogant and distanced from other people. The inquisitor, thus, repeats the myth of the absolute Jewish separation. This assumption was used by some to justify punitive actions against its community in the early modern age but also in the 1930s. By others, more benevolently, it was seen as a probable explanation of an enduring anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Being prone to seclusion, Jews would not be able to assimilate into other societies or to build up an inner connection to other territories than Israel. The eternal Hebrew would always stay oriental and never become neither Spanish, nor European, nor German.

Sommer heavily criticized these slogans in his novel. Jews would develop a strong and emotional relationship with their abode, their home-countries, may it be *Sepharad* or Europe. However, he also stated that Judaism was more important than local patriotism. At the end of the novel, the diverse characters fulfill their destinies according to the strategies they have

wecheln mußten. [...] Abends aber fielen Hut, Gürtel, Degen und Rosenkranz zu Boden. Man riß sich die westliche Tünche vom Gesicht. Die Schultern machten sich von der sie beherrschenden Edelmannshaltung frei. Man war wieder Geschöpf des Ostens, Diener eines schonungslosen Gesetztes, das einen wohl beurlaubte, aber niemals freigab. [...] Kann überhaupt Wasser das Denken eines Menschen verändern oder da Erinnern auslöschen?“

²⁸ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 193–194. My translation: „Ihr werdet sagen, daß ihr tausend Jahre, vielleicht noch länger im Lande sitzt. Das ist völlig belanglos. Denn wenn eure Vorfahren auch vor zehntausend Jahren eingewandert wären, so seid ihr doch in keiner Wiese mit diesem Land verwachsen. Unaufhörlich müßt ihr etwas vor der großen Masse voraushaben, und wäre es auch nur euer Gesetz. Die Römer wurden mit euch nicht fertig. Daß ihr ihren Göttern nicht opfern wolltet war gewiß lobenswert. Aber in eurer verdammten Anmaßung habt ihr euch von ihnen abgesondert. Eure Wüstenregel war euch wichtiger als das Zusammenleben mit Römern und Goten. Schon daß ihr euch stets mit den Ungläubigen besser verstandet als mit uns, beweist, daß ihr dorthin gehört, woher ihr und die Ungläubigen gekommen seid.“

chosen towards the Alhambra Edict. Abraham Senior and Luis Santangel convert to Christianity and keep their belongings, for the moment, and live in constant fear and remorse for giving up their origins. Juan Garcia decides to stay his ground and to confront Torquemada by denying having killed the child of La Guardia. Although he was able to preserve his identity, he eventually suffers a brutal death at the stake. Abravanel presents the reader with the best possible solution to avoid the perils of Spanish totalization: exile. By giving up his beloved home, making a painful decision, the leader can maintain his identity and life at the same time, not falling prey to the machinations of the inquisition. The protagonist Fonseca at first prefers to assimilate but soon follows the example of Abravanel and leaves Spain on a boat full of refugees.²⁹

By presenting these different solutions to his audience, Sommer tried to advise on how to act in the critical situation the Jews of Europe found themselves in before the Second World War. Shortly after the author was crafting his novel, German troops crossed the Czech border to take possession of the Sudetenland. Having fled from Karlovy Vary/Karlsbad to Prague, Sommer must have felt like the Jews of Granada, awaiting the final invasion by Spain or Germany. With his novel, Sommer was addressing his compatriots who endeavored to arrange themselves with the new regime and to assimilate. For the author, this was no option. The Nazi regime would tread the Jews under their jurisdiction as did the Catholic Kings. In *Botschaft aus Granada*, the inquisitors Peter Arbues and Torquemada are described more than once as ‘*Geheimpolizei*’,³⁰ equating them to the Gestapo. Their methods of *inquisition* evoke a similar image; their goal converges in the inner totalization of a state. ‘Totalization’, a word with special connotations in the German discourse during the late 1930s, crops up repeatedly throughout Sommer’s book with the objective to give the Catholic Kings the complexion of fascist dictators.³¹

The author’s message to his compatriots was thus that they should not try to assimilate, nor to stand their ground, as did Juan Garcia, only to die in the process but to chose exile as the only way of keeping one’s Jewish identity and life simultaneously. The historical novel became a warning and well-meant advisor. As the succeeding years would prove, Sommer’s incentive had its justification. He himself fled to Great Britain, where he gained citizenship and died in 1955. The writer continued to publish historical novels until his demise, exceedingly obsessed with the topic of the Holocaust. His book, *Botschaft aus Granada*, was forbidden by the Nazi Regime and became one of the many oeuvres burned just like Juan Garcia had been about four hundred years earlier. Involuntarily, the quote of Heinrich Heine, which gained cliché-status by now, comes to mind: ‘Those who burn books will in the end burn people.’³²

²⁹ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 422.

³⁰ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 90–96.

³¹ Sommer, *Botschaft*, 16–17.

³² Heinrich Heine cited after Avineri, “Burning Books”.

Hermann Kesten – *Ferdinand und Isabella* between Brutality and Irony

A few years before Sommer was writing his novel in the Czech Republic, Hermann Kesten worked on a historical novel in Nizza. The southern French town was a hotspot for German authors in exile who had to flee the Nazi's grasp to power in 1933. In the year 1934, Kesten shared a flat with Heinrich Mann and Joseph Roth, all living with their wives. During the day, they grappled with their historical novels and in the evening, they habitually drank wine as a complementing activity to discussing their work. All three novels were deeply imbued with the worries connected to world politics, especially the one's 'at home'. While some authors resented the trio's occupation as an escapist waste of time, arguing that they should use their talent to attack the Nazi-regime directly, others like Leo Feuchtwanger saw the value in using the historical novel as a tool to attack the ideological enemy.³³

Sommer focused on the Jewish people and their story, but Kesten was much more interested in the Catholic Kings, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castille. They symbolized for him a new authoritarian rule that had been, at first, promising. According to Kesten, the Spanish kings Juan II and Enrique IV, the predecessors of Isabella, had been catastrophic monarchs with a weak hand on the scepter. The queen maintained a much stronger grip, introducing centralized forms of power, a state-organized economy, and street-controlling militias. The author created a political dichotomy between the lax but tolerant kings and the controlling Isabella. For Kesten's contemporaries, it must have been simple to draw parallels to the Weimar Republic, which was often perceived to be weak and powerless, and the dictatorship under the swastika in contrast to the former.

The young queen's politics were, hence, shown to be fruitful. Her radical new approach and selfless actions gained her, according to the author, the love of the masses. She provided inner stability and a successful expansionist foreign policy, conquering Granada and America. This initial appeal blinded not only religious fanatics and the common people but also the wisest personalities of the court. Ironically enough, even the munificent banker Abravanel is willing to support her warlike ambitions, financing the enduring war against the last Nasrid Kingdom. In the novel, the famous Jewish hero admits to a friend that he hopes for a Sephardic unification under the Spanish crown. As Kesten endeavored to show, his hopes should be drastically disappointed.³⁴

Where Sommer outlined a tragic tale, interpreting the expulsion of the Jews as a reoccurring natural process, Kesten presents his readers a satire filled with bitter irony. The cenacle of learned men and rabbis is equally deceived by the shimmering personality of the young queen but would soon discover her animosity towards their community. While Kesten derided the Hebrews for being naive, he tackled the policy of 'pure blood' even fiercer.

Many chapters into the book, Isabella meets the historian Hernan de Pulgar, who is horrified by the inquisition's persecutions in Sevilla. Not believing in the separation of races, the writer reproaches the queen:

³³ Magali Laure Nieradka Klincksieck, "Ihrem Roman scheint die Südliche Sonne zu bekommen. Drei historische Romane von Hermann Kesten, Heinrich Mann und Joseph Roth im Vergleich," *Études Germaniques* 4, no. 252 (2008): 935–941, here 935–937.

³⁴ Kesten, *Ferdinand*, 134.

'Jews or jewified or baptized Jews or related Jews or assumed or accused or denounced or Jew-friends or no Anti-Semites, it is all the same. Who remains save? A plague has broken out in Sevilla. Everyone accuses everyone. [...] where does it end, who remains save, who is not a Jew? Do you not see your relatives? And the relatives of our King Ferdinand? Yes, also he!' ³⁵

The all-encompassing paranoia that Kesten voiced through the words of Pulgar is reminiscent of the race-policies of the Third Reich but also of global antisemitic fervor in press and media. The suspicion of people being Jewish or being controlled by Jews could be easily proven by arbitrarily ascribing certain pedigrees, traits, and names to Hebrew descend. Antisemitic conspiracy theories, according to Kesten, functioned hence like a self-fulfilling prophecy and eventually, everyone would become Jewish, even the kings themselves. The writer questioned through Pulgar's diatribe the concept of racial or ethnic segregation by adducing the inscrutability of real-life genealogies.

An idea that is often put in relation to Jewish conspiracies constitutes the myth of the traitor. The trope of the Jewish traitor, used as a discursive instrument to disparage enemies or find an accusable scapegoat for current problems, can be seen as a historical commonplace. May it be the famous Dreyfus-Affaire (1894) or the *Dolchstoßlegende* after the First World War, Kesten could rely on a broad panoply of antisemitic betrayal-stories to ridicule.³⁶ In *Ferdinand und Isabella*, their Hebrew subjects are proclaimed to be agents of the Moorish enemy, sharing their oriental customs and outlandish garbs. Repeatedly, Kesten's characters speak of '*Juden und Mauren*' in a connecting generalization. Both ethnoreligious groups would work together to fight the Spanish crown and heave the Ottoman Sultan on the Iberian throne. Although such formulations can be culled out from early modern Spanish texts, Kesten was able to redeploy them in the context of the 1930s without losing the attention of his readers. The novel targeted an audience that shared Kesten's education, opinions, and press-consumption, being able to read between the lines and catch his jocular representation of serious events.

Similar to Sommer's version, Kesten's Sephardim eventually have to leave their home country and are struck with tremendous grieve by the mere thought of exile. Although the author's scathing sarcasm prevails throughout most of the novel, deriding antisemitic tropes like a strong adherence to authoritarianism, race-segregation, and the Jewish-traitor-myth, at the sight of the brutal expulsion, the author abandoned his ironic tone. Just like in *Botschaft aus Granada*, the Mediterranean Sea in *Ferdinand und Isabella* attains a menacing symbolism. The travels on its waves are filled with pirates, slave-traders, pestilence, and despair. Only the Jews welcomed by the Ottoman Sultan are eventually able to find some sort of deliverance. The Muslim ruler, in Kesten's depiction, wonders over the stupidity of the Catholic Kings to expel their most profitable subjects.³⁷

Exemplarily, Kesten had to live in exile himself, a condition he perceived to be catastrophic. Being separated from one's social and natural surroundings, cut off from most of the German publishing-houses and the connected financial income must have been indeed a disastrous situation. In 1939, Kesten was imprisoned as a hostile foreign visitor in France, only

³⁵ Kesten, *Ferdinand*, 605. My translation: „[...] Juden oder verjudet oder getaufte Juden oder verschwägerte Juden oder verdächtigt oder bezichtigt oder denunziert oder Judenfreunde oder keine Antisemiten, es ist alles eins und dasselbe. Wer ist noch sicher? Eine Seuche ist ausgebrochen in Sevilla. Jeder denunziert jeden. [...] wo nimmt das ein Ende, wer ist noch sicher, wer ist kein Jude? Siehst du nicht deine Verwandten? Und die Verwandten unseres Königs Ferdinand? Ja, auch er!”

³⁶ Wolfgang Benz, *Bilder vom Juden. Studien zum alltäglichen Antisemitismus* (München: 2001); Wolfgang Benz, *Die Protokolle der Weisen von Zion. Die Legende von der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (München: 2007).

³⁷ Kesten, *Ferdinand*, 705–706.

to flee to America in 1940. Instead of traveling over the Mediterranean to be welcomed by the Ottoman sultan, he crossed the Atlantic to be received by a no less powerful host.

Conclusion

Kesten's and Sommer's accounts of the siege of Granada differ not only in their focus and description but mainly in their basic incentives. Sommer tried to create a Sephardic identity by drawing clear demarcation-lines between a Jewish, biological ethnicity and the Christian Other. In his view, *Sepharad* constitutes a nation like Spain or Germany. Sommer reappropriated an antisemitic orientalizing and used it to formulate an enclosed Jewish identity, neglecting the possibility of assimilation in the process. Kesten, on the other side, endeavored to deride his contemporaries and ancestors alike. The frontiers between ethnic groups became a farce, their supposedly glorious past a satirical tale. In one way or the other, both were writing against a new emerging fascist narrative in historical fiction: the phantasm of a supreme European civilization or race. While Sommer aimed at telling the same story from a different perspective, Kesten tried to deconstruct a nationalist worldview with dismantling irony. As different both incentives and styles might be, they share an adherence to *Sephardism* and the wish to portray an alternative version of history.

The Mediterranean Sea, playing a virulent role in their novels, hereby does not function as a frontier between Europe and Orient, nor does it signify a cultural space. The gaze upon the waves from the vantage point of the Iberian coast frightens the Jewish people, as described by both authors. The Mediterranean attains the allegorical meaning of exile. It is equated with the loss of belongings and belonging, promising nothing but a less prosperous future. On the way to their new homes, the Jewish people of Kesten's and Sommer's novels encounters pestilence, pirates, and slavery, living through the hardship the writers envisioned for themselves. Both authors employed the historical story of the conquest of Granada and its deep connection to the Alhambra Edict of 1492 to express their own despair caused by expulsion from Germany, not Spain. Consequently, their dreaded seas of exile would not be the Mediterranean but the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean.

The historical novels *Botschaft aus Granada* and *Ferdinand und Isabella* depicted a past event to convey strong personal emotions but also an indirect criticism towards fascist politics of the twentieth century. Additionally, the genre assumed the role of a compass on how to act during exile, as an explaining narrative to the incomprehensible reasons for one's persecution, and as a device to overcome traumatic events.

In Kesten's novel *Ferdinand und Isabella*, two poets observe the pogrom of Toledo. One of the two, Don Garcia Esteban de Talavera, concedes that:

'I [...] observe such a surely tragic event just according to its historic and poetical quality. Historically, this play is not unseen at this location, [...] Poetically, such an event is too disgusting, too real, too human, to inspire the true poet. Imagine the valuable form of the sonnet filled with a pogrom, impossible? Well!'³⁸

³⁸ Kesten, *Ferdinand*, 247. My translation: „Ich [...] betrachte solch ein für sich gewiss bejammernswertes Ereignis nur nach seiner historischen und seiner poetischen Qualität. Historisch betrachtet ist dieses Schauspiel an diesem Ort nicht neu, [...] Poetisch betrachtet aber ist solch ein Ereignis zu grausig, zu wirklich, zu menschlich, als dass es einen wahren Poeten anregen könnte. Stellt Euch die kostbare Form des Sonetts gefüllt mit einem Pogrom vor, unmöglich? Also!”

With his novel, the author contradicted the sentiment of the imagined medieval poet. He argues in favor of the historical novel as a possible tool to depict the history of the common people and ‘real’ suffering, a revealing description much needed in his period. For Kesten, historiography is more than heroic glorifications and a historicist focus on the extraordinary. It should also encompass hardship, meaninglessness, and exile. According to Sommer and Kesten, the early modern Mediterranean does not signify the story of a European triumph over the Orient, it rather symbolizes the tragic and cruel fate of old *Sepharad*.

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