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FORUM

History, Self Interest, and Polyphony

Michael Meng

YAIR Mintzker's book on Jew Süss raises a series of provocative questions about German history and history itself, which this forum aims to address. Specifically, it presents four reflections on Mintzker's book that cover the following range of topics: Jay Howard Geller situates Mintzker's work within the historiography on Jewish biographies and antisemitic trials; Sarah Maza explores whether Mintzker pursues the venerable task of getting to the "truth" of who Joseph Oppeinhemer was, despite his claims to the contrary; Jesse Spohnholz considers Mintzker's book as a model of microhistory; and my essay takes a broader approach by confronting the central issue of self-interest in history.

To do so, I would like to bring Mintzker's book in conversation with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which I taught in 2019 in conjunction with a visit to Clemson University by Professor Mintzker. Although there is no direct connection between Tolstoy and Mintzker—Mintzker does not cite Tolstoy as an influence—an intriguing affinity exists between the two. Tolstoy and Mintzker both explore the issue of historical narration, specifically the question as to why there are so many various and conflicting narratives about the past. They ask: Why do we tell so many different and competing stories about a given historical event? The answer both Tolstoy and Mintzker offer centers on the role that storytelling plays in the advancement of particular, individual interests: individuals tell their own competing stories of what happened so as to promote their own particular interests, often at the expense of others. Thus, conflict over the past arises not just because different people tell their own versions of what happened, but because they tell their own versions to promote their own agendas or pursue their own goals. By making this comparison, my purpose is to draw out the significance of Mintzker's book through the lens of Tolstoy on the one hand and to think about self-interest in history on the other.

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy explores the connection between self-interest and history through three layers of narration: that of historical actors who guide their actions according to foundational narratives in a given cultural tradition; that of historians who write and think about those narratives by proposing a narrative of their own; and that of Tolstoy, who, through an omniscient narrator he created, intervenes in these two narrative layers by offering a narrative of both. With all these overlapping levels of narration, Tolstoy wants to show, in part, the complexity of history: not only do we have narratives, but we also have historical actors who act within narratives and historians who think about their actions relating to another narrative or set of narratives.

However, Tolstoy does not just reveal multiple layers of narration and leave it at that. On the contrary, he goes a step further to suggest that all of the various stories people tell and act out can be thought of in terms of one single narrative—the one Tolstoy tells in *War and Peace* of people acting to advance their own interests so as to "feel" as if they have the agency to free

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themselves from what limits or perturbs them.[1] For Tolstoy, humans act out of dissatisfaction to change or, at least, to fight against what bothers them, most obviously nature, which condemns them to death. Humans act and make history in rebellion against death according to the natural imperative of self-preservation. Although some historians might balk at the audacity of Tolstoy to reduce all of history to the needs of self-preservation, the basest of which is avoiding death, it is worth asking why Tolstoy makes the claim that he does. What is Tolstoy's own interest in writing *War and Peace*? As the title suggests, his interest lies in overcoming war to achieve peace; he wants to find a way out of the horror and cruelty of history as motivated by the self-interested desire to survive.

Yet the way out of history for Tolstoy is difficult, if not impossible: it entails letting go of the self-interested wish to rebel against death by accepting mortality as the basic limit of human life from which all others flow. Let me explain by turning to the example of Napoleon, both the historical actor and the object of historical narration as portrayed and discussed by Tolstoy.

According to Tolstoy, Napoleon lives the narrative of the conqueror who imposes his will on the continent of Europe for the sake of gaining power while alive and securing a place in history after his death. In this respect, Napoleon is the epitome of unbridled self-interest because he views and acts in the world for his own personal gain, above all to win worldly glory on the battlefield. "I live only for posterity," Napoleon was reported to have said. "Death is nothing, but to live defeated and without glory is to die every day."[2] Napoleon acts for the reward of worldly salvation, going to battle, like Achilles did, in defiance of death, for the sake of living forever in the glorious pages of history.

That Napoleon strives to be remembered by history for the greatness of his deeds depends on the existence of historians to sing his praises—a point that Tolstoy emphasizes throughout *War and Peace*, most extensively in the second part of his epilogue, where he argues that historians affirm, wittingly or not, the very power and glory that Napoleon seeks to acquire. Historians make Napoleon into a great man whose military power and genius earn him the reward of immortal remembrance he desires. In so doing, they remain wedded to the ancient, Homeric view of history as salvaging human deeds from oblivion.[3] For Tolstoy, this view is not just outdated but erroneous because it promotes the selfish pursuit of immortality, which in turn engenders violence in futile rebellion against "the laws of necessity … starting from the fact that every man dies."[4] To strive for immortal glory is vain and harmful in Tolstoy's view. Hence, he counsels humble acceptance of death so as to overcome the violence and vanity of history (i.e., of attempting to secure salvation for oneself through action, or works, as Martin Luther would put it). Having said that, though, Tolstoy doubts whether one can ever fully free oneself from the desire to be remembered. He asks: Can one relinquish interest in one's own preservation? Can one truly live humbly in the world with no striving for a future beyond death?

[1]Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2007), 1201.

[2]Georges Lefebvre, *Napoleon*, trans. Henry F. Stockhold and J.E. Anderson (New York: Routledge Classics, 2011), 58.

[3]As Tolstoy writes: "The ancients left us examples of heroic poems in which heroes constitute the entire interest of history, and we still cannot get used to the fact that, for our human time, history of this sort has no meaning." Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 754.

[4]Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1211.

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Certainly, the historical actors of Mintzker's book cannot let go of the want to promote their own interests at the expense of others, in this case at the expense of a single individual, Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, who was strangled to death in front of as many as twenty thousand people on February 4, 1738, just north of Stuttgart. His body was then displayed on a gibbet to serve "as a hideous example for others," in the words of the public verdict.[5] Of what was Oppenheimer a hideous example? To his persecutors and, above all, to one in particular, a judge named Philipp Friedrich Jäger, who zealously pursued charges against him and who wrote the factual summary of his case (the *species facti*), Oppenheimer stood as a threat to the social and political hierarchy of the Duchy of Württemberg with his mockery of "all good order."[6] Oppenheimer's alleged mockery of the very order that Jäger tasked himself with upholding, as an ambitious jurist and as the son of a Lutheran family of state administrators (his family belonged to the social group known as the *Ehrbarkeit*, the worthies, who staffed the ranks of the Württemberg administration), bothered him greatly. As he wrote in the *species facti*, Süss "had an unbearably arrogant air about him and he showed no respect to the great lords or the late duke."[7] Jäger continued:

> It is known to all that he considered himself independent of all religions. He was without any religion at all, without conscience, without honor, without culture, without loyalty, and without faith. He nourished himself only on robbery and treachery, and indeed often made it known throughout the land how he lived almost like a prince, engaging in prostitution, fornication, and possibly also incest, all extremely insolently, and sometimes even with Christian women.[8]

Jäger portrays Oppenheimer as a self-proclaimed prince who believes that he stands above any and all social norms, bound to nothing other than his delight in mockery, money, and women. Oppenheimer's sense of freedom offends Jäger because it does not conform with the particular life that Jäger believes one ought to live. As an expression of particularism, Jäger's censure of Oppenheimer could not be more different from Tolstoy's censure of Napoleon. Whereas Tolstoy rebukes Napoleon's self-assertion of freedom as an incoherent denial of the Newtonian view that there are universal, natural laws that cannot be made to serve one's own interests because they govern everyone equally, Jäger attacks Oppenheimer's assertion of freedom in defense of his own interests. In other words, Tolstoy's rebuke of Napoleon aims to undermine self-interest as the basis of domination, whereas Jäger's attack on Oppenheimer has the effect of perpetuating it. Hence, Jäger's *species facti* can hardly be characterized as an objective report shorn of self-interest. Totaling eighty pages, it creates a fantasy of Oppenheimer as a destroyer of everything that Jäger accepts as true in the guise of a factual report. As Mintzker concludes: "The document's length and many convoluted details served a double purpose … They camouflaged the *species facti*'s extreme tendentiousness, and they helped hide the very personal stakes Jäger had in its composition."[9]

Mintzker's conclusion challenges the belief that the facts speak for themselves becasue they are selected and arranged by individuals so as to serve their own particular interests.

[5]Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 5.
[6]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 93.
[7]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 93.
[8]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 95.
[9]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 92.

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Tolstoy would hardly disagree with this conclusion. But it is one thing for a novelist to come to this conclusion, quite another for a historian to do so, for the historian, unlike the novelist, tells the truth based on the ostensibly raw facts. Or so historians have long claimed, ever since Thucydides, with a few exceptions such as Mintzker, who does not claim to tell the facts about Oppenheimer for the simple fact that he has none to tell. Though he has an enormous archive of material before him—some thirty thousand pages on Oppenheimer's trial—this material consists of multiple conflicting stories about what Oppenheimer supposedly did, if he did anything criminal at all.

The facts we know about Oppenheimer are very basic: he was born probably in 1697 or 1698; he became a successful court Jew during the reign of the Catholic duke Carl Alexander; he was arrested on the night of Carl Alexander's sudden death by stroke; and he was interrogated, tried, and executed in 1738. Nothing else is known with any certainty, especially in regard to his mysterious arrest immediately after the duke's death. And yet there exists an archive of some thirty thousand pages filled with stories about an alleged crime he was said to have committed, an archive that grows with each new story told about Jew Süss, including *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*. That Mintzker produces yet another story about Jew Süss is an irony that the Greek satirist Lucian, a writer Mintzker discusses at length in his book, would have parodied.[10] But Lucian's parody of Mintzker's narrative would not be fair because Mintzker does not simply generate another narrative about Jew Süss; rather, he writes a narrative that expresses an awareness of the limits of narration. Consider how he brings his book to a close:

> Historians disagree about almost everything. They have competing personal preferences and motivations in exploring the past … But while competing works of history are often strikingly different in terms of their ideology and content, the basic literary (narratological) structure they follow is almost always the same. The basic blueprint for such structures includes a beginning, a middle, and an end, in that order; it contains a single plotline that traces a process of change; and it involves a narrator—the historian him- or herself—who hardly ever admits that he or she does not know all the relevant facts about the matter at hand. Linearity, unity, and omniscience are almost universal characteristics of contemporary history writing.[11]

Mintzker evinces frustration with the continued dominance of Aristotle's linear definition of what constitutes a narrative, in part because he wants to open up a different way of writing history, a "polyphonic history" that embraces plurality over unity. Although Mintzker's notion of polyphonic history affirms Aristotle through the very act of proposing a definition of history to replace his, it strives nevertheless to offer something more than mere rebellion against Aristotle's totalizing ambition to bring everything together into one single, master narrative.

What is a polyphonic history? The word *polyphony* comes from music to characterize a musical texture that brings together two or more independent, yet equally voiced and simultaneously performed melodic lines. This interplay of different musical layers, all interacting with one another, distinguishes polyphony from monophony, where there is one melodic layer, and from homophony, where there is one dominant layer.[12]

[10]Lucian parodies Thucydides to argue that history is closer to poetry than it would like to admit in its vain embrace of writing for posterity. See Lucian, "How to Write History," in *Lucian*, VI, trans. K. Kilburn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2–73.

[11]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 284.

[12]A concise description, with examples, of polyphony can be found in the Sonic Glossary of Columbia University (http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/sonicg/terms/polyphony.html).

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Yet although the notion of polyphony comes from music, it has been developed most thoroughly by the literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, another Russian thinker who made highly innovative contributions to narratology through his interest in dialogue. Opposed to the monological tradition of the Western metaphysical tradition as established by Aristotle (or, more precisely, what survives of Aristotle's writings because we do not have his dialogues), Bakhtin developed a model of dialogue in a number of works. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, for example, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky displayed a distinctive openness to dialogue through the innovation of what Bakhtin called the "polyphonic novel," a literary creation that can be defined by its genuine interest in talking *with* others rather than *about* others.[13] This interest in dialogue animates every aspect of Dostoevsky's art. Dostoevsky's novels express a plurality of varying views without harmonizing them into any one overarching view or order; they refuse to fix individuals into a determined and final narrative; they embrace irony, laughter, and parody with the effect of disrupting the hierarchy and order that allow one view to dominate another; and, perhaps most importantly, in his novels Dostoevsky mocks his own authority as an omniscient narrator, thereby refusing to take seriously his own authority as knower and creator. The latter is crucial as the condition that makes polyphony possible because the one putatively in charge, the author, must be able to ridicule and question himself, lest he take himself too seriously and become monophonic, if not tyrannical.

Tyranny was much on Bakhtin's mind when he wrote his book on Dostoevsky in 1920s Russia, and he understood well that humor does not respect, and even challenges, the claims to absolute truth on which tyranny depends. Humor is irreverent and disobedient. It therefore lies at the heart of polyphony insofar as it breaks the hierarchies that underpin the tyrannical suppression of plurality, dialogue, and individuality.

Tyranny was also on Mintzker's mind when he wrote his book, which opens with a brief discussion of the Nazi film *Jud Süss* (1940). For Mintzker, as for Bakhtin, polyphony seems to offer a way out of monological domination by resisting the "urge to reduce" various voices to a "single narrative."[14] Moreover, polyphony resists the concomitant urge to impart a "sense of finality and definitive truthfulness" to any one single narrative.[15] Polyphony embraces plurality and doubt with the effect of challenging the unity and certainty of narratives such as Jäger's harangue against Joseph Oppenheimer, a monophonic narrative that firmly and dangerously believes in its own truthfulness. In so doing, Mintzker shares Bakhtin's interest in breaking narratives so as to keep them more fluid and more democratic. At the same time, Mintzker pays less heed to comedy than does Bakhtin in at least two ways.

First, when Mintzker addresses possible objections to his polyphonic history, he does so with little recourse to humor, leaving his authority as a historian largely unquestioned in the dialogues that conclude four of his chapters (the dialogues feature a conversation between Mintzker and an imagined critic of his book, which serves the purpose of advancing Mintzker's polyphonic history). Second, Mintzker's chapter on the satirist David Fassmann, a contemporary of Oppenheimer's, underplays the bite of Fassmann's comedy, which mocks the vanity of wealth, power, and fame in the face of death. Thus, Fassmann

[13]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Carly Emerson, intro. Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[14]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 19.

[15]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 278.

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can be interpreted as a satirist in the spirit of Lucian, who mocks the very order that the trial against Oppenheimer aimed to defend, rather than as a figure who affirmed the established order by vilifying Oppenheimer, as Mintzker argues. There is, to be sure, a darkness to Fassmann's humor, a cruelty to his laughter, but it lies less in the anti-Semitic clichés that Fassmann mockingly reproduces and more in the disrespect he shows toward others by laughing at their suffering and death.[16] To laugh at the suffering of others is to reject the Jewish-Christian embrace and redemption of suffering.

Whatever one might think of the success of Mintzker's attempt to create a polyphonic history, his interest in polyphony points to the issue of self-interest in history. By way of conclusion, let me reflect on the relationship between polyphony and self-interest in Mintzker's book. At its core, polyphony attempts to curb or moderate the pernicious consequences of unfettered self-interest by creating a text of multiple voices, which are not harmonized by one individual into a final and overarching order as is the case in monological and homophonic texts. Put differently, polyphony requires the restriction of self-interest in order for each independent and equally prominent voice to interact with each other prominent voice in a manner that exceeds the "boundaries of the individual will."[17] And therein lies the challenge of polyphony: Can such a text be written? That is, can self-interest be overcome to produce a truly democratic text in which no one voice dominates over another or, even, all others?

Tolstoy has his doubts, as does, perhaps, Mintzker, or at least the evidence he presents casts doubts on the possibility of creating a truly polyphonic history. Tolstoy has his doubts because no matter how many interacting and varying layers he might create in his writings—and there are many—he cannot fully overcome the authority of his own voice. He can diminish it, but he cannot overcome it because he appeals to the authority of his voice as a writer every time he writes. As for Mintzker, most of the sources he quotes are not in themselves polyphonic. Jäger's is monological, and Fassmann's is homophonic, to mention the two examples I have discussed.[18]

Mintzker and Tolstoy both emphasize the challenge of letting go of the desire to become an authority by writing monologically rather than polyphonically. To note this challenge is not to deter historians from the task of striving to write polyphonic history, but it is to stress what such a history demands, namely the humility to challenge Aristotle more energetically by asking: Why do we tell stories at all? Why do we stitch together the lives of the dead and call it history? What is at stake in writing history, be it polyphonic or not? Tolstoy's answer is clear: history, like any piece of writing, is a vain expression of rebellion against the tragic plot of beginning, middle, and end that constitutes the essence of mortal life. Thus both the novelist and the historian can never fully be free of self-interest, can never fully overcome the need to leave a trace for posterity.

[16]In addition to his mockery of Oppenheimer, Fassmann wrote, for example, a mocking eulogy of Jacob Paul von Grundling, a historian who had become Frederick William's court fool.

[17]Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 21.

[18]As Mintzker cogently argues, Fassmann's text is homophonic in the sense that, although he allows Oppenheimer to speak much more than Jäger does, his own voice still dominates. See Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 275.

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The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: Telling the Story of a Jewish Life

Jay Howard Geller

For the student of Jewish history, Yair Mintzker's *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is an engagingly multifaceted work. Though ostensibly a biography of a famous (or infamous) Jew, it presents a social history of an era. As such, it is part of the scholarly literature on early modern European Jewry, but thematically, it also speaks to scholarship on anti-Semitic trials in modern European history. This multivalence lends itself to separate, though interrelated discussions of the book within the framework of Jewish history.

Jewish biography is a thriving field, as evinced by the large number of recently published Jewish biographies and by the fact that the National Jewish Book Awards have a discrete category for biography, separated in 2018 from the category of autobiography and memoir. With an emphasis on a vibrant narrative, even approaching novelistic at times, biographies are a notably accessible way to convey history. As a mode of writing history, however, biography is considerably less popular among professors of Jewish history than it is among non-academics—including rabbis, teachers at Jewish communal educational institutions, and journalists and columnists—who write history books.[1] Indeed, it often seems as if academically trained historians cede the field of biography to historical writers who may not share our expectations for archival work, source criticism, or engagement with the preexisting literature.

This is not to say that academic scholars of Jewish history never write biographies, but intellectual and literary biographies seem to predominate among academic Jewish biographies.[2] In essence, intellectuals (namely professors) choose to elucidate the lives of other

[1]To name a few acclaimed recent Jewish biographies, written by writers outside the traditional academy: Ariel Burger, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018); Gregory J. Wallance, *The Woman Who Fought an Empire: Sarah Aaronsohn and Her Nili Spy Ring* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2018); Francine Klagsbrun, *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 2017); George Prochnik, *The Impossible Exile: Stefan Zweig at the End of the World* (New York: Other Press, 2014); Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History* (New York: HarperWave, 2014). In fact, most of the books that have won the National Jewish Book Award for Biography or been finalists for that prize were not written by academic scholars, in contrast to other National Jewish Book Award categories, such as those for History, American Jewish Studies, and Modern Jewish Thought and Experience.

[2]See, among others, Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Ismar Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); William Kolbrenner, *The Last Rabbi: Joseph Soloveitchik and Talmudic Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016); Aaron W. Hughes, *Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Amir Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017); Noam Zadoff, *Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back: An Intellectual Biography* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017); Adi Gordon, *Toward Nationalism's End: An Intellectual Biography of Hans Kohn* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017); Yaacob Dweck, *Dissident Rabbi: The Life of Jacob Sasportas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

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intellectuals (namely religious scholars, academics, or writers). A notable exception to this broad trend is the ten-year-old Jewish Lives series from Yale University Press, which covers the lives of Jews from the worlds of politics, entertainment, arts and letters, and even sport. Although some books in the series have non-academic authors, many others have been written by leading scholarly experts on their subject.[3] Nonetheless, with their particular style and relative dearth of citations, it is debatable whether Jewish Lives biographies count as academic biographies, even when written by history professors. By contrast, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, which won the National Jewish Book Award for History in 2017, is assuredly an academic book, resting on an immense body of archival research and in dialogue with the scholarly literature, as well as a biography of a single Jew who was not a leading intellectual of his time.

As other contributors to this forum note in their essays, Mintzker's methodology is particularly innovative. To bring a new angle to the well-known story of the trial and execution of Joseph Oppenheimer, Mintzker has opted for what he calls "polyphonic history," an assemblage of differing, and largely simultaneous, perspectives on the event, reminiscent of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's technique in the film *Rashomon* (1950). Mintzker's narrative mediators are three men directly involved in the trial and one contemporaneous outside observer: investigating magistrate Philipp Friedrich Jäger; Christoph David Bernard, a Jewish apostate who attempted to convert Oppenheimer to Christianity; Mordechai Schloss, one of Oppenheimer's business competitors and a member of the Jewish community; and David Fassmann, a popular writer and author of an early, heavily fictionalized biography of Oppenheimer. This methodological choice is, however, more than a stylistic innovation. It is largely a reaction to the archival and literary silence of the central figure. Mintzker needed to find a way to write Oppenheimer's story when Oppenheimer's own version of events was simply not available. Additionally, based on source availability, Mintzker has written a Jewish story largely, though not entirely, using non-Jewish sources.

In many ways, Mintzker's response to the variety of challenges he faced, both thematic and in terms of available sources, finds a satisfactory resolution in his utilization of biography. *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is rich in thick description and might be considered a social history as well as a biography. (The tensions between these two genres are problematized in the article by Sarah Maza.) Mintzker uses the four juxtaposed narratives as vehicles for relating aspects of the history of the Duchy of Württemberg and the Holy Roman Empire in the early eighteenth century, as well as the social history of Jews in that era. His exposition of the situation of the Jews is foregrounded in the third of his four narratives—"Joseph and His Brothers: Third Conversation"—based on an account by Mordechai Schloss and Callmann Seligmann, who knew Oppenheimer well and witnessed his trial.

[3]Some Yale University Press Jewish Lives biographies written by non-academics are Hillel Halkin, *Jabotinsky: A Life* (2014); Francine Prose, *Peggy Guggenheim: The Shock of the Modern* (2015); Phyllis Rose, *Alfred Stieglitz: Taking Pictures, Making Painters* (2019); James Kaplan, *Irving Berlin: New York Genius* (2019).

Books in the same series written by academics on subjects of their expertise include Shulamit Volkov, *Walther Rathenau: Weimar's Fallen Statesman* (2012); Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (2014); Steven Gimbel, *Einstein: His Space and Times* (2015); Hasia R. Diner, *Julius Rosenwald: Repairing the World* (2017); David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah* (2018); Steven Nadler, *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* (2018); Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (2019).

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In both of these decisions, Mintzker indicates intriguing ways that academic Jewish historians can write biography, combining captivating narrative and rigorous analysis, overcoming gaps in the source base where these lacunae might undermine the entire enterprise. In doing so, we have an opportunity to bridge the gap between writing for an academic audience and writing for a popular audience.

Mintzker is certainly not the only Jewish historian who has made such choices. Even in Eliyahu Stern's intellectual biography of the Vilner Gaon, a paradigmatic religious and intellectual figure of the eighteenth century, the examination is made more accessible and more meaningful by thoroughly contextualizing the Gaon's life and achievements.[4] The success of Lisa Moses Leff's *The Archive Thief*, focusing on a Jewish scholar previously little known outside of certain circles, speaks to the potential for academic biography embedded in a larger story. Leff illuminates the work of Jewish cultural salvage and reconstruction after World War II as she relates the extraordinary life of Zosa Szajkowski.[5] My book *The Scholems: A Story of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction* and Mirjam Zadoff's *Werner Scholem: A German Life* contextualize the experiences of a single family to make broader points about Jewish life in Germany in the early twentieth century.[6] Additionally, in looking at the Scholems before World War I, I faced a similar challenge as Mintzker, namely a paucity of autobiographical sources from the subject(s) under examination. This is where other, non-Jewish voices and documents fill the vacuum and where the landscape of context comes to the fore. Naturally, this raises the question of the degree to which Jewish history or biography should be told through non-Jewish sources.

Perhaps an even more germane comparison can be made between Mintzker's book and Joshua Schreier's *The Merchants of Oran: A Jewish Port at the Dawn of Empire*.[7] Schreier uses the life of the merchant Jacob Lasry and several others to elucidate the changing status of North African Jewry under Ottoman and nascent French rule and revises our understanding of the beginnings of French colonialism in Algeria. A Jew's road to commercial success, wealth, and even political influence in that world differed from those of his Muslim and Christian neighbors and, as a result, entailed different perils. Moreover, and critically, in the absence of Lasry's own writings, Schreier heavily relies on non-Jewish sources and Jewish community records to tell Lasry's story. Considering Lasry's machinations and frequently unsavory reputation, Schreier has needed to read beyond the critiques of him in the available documents.

[4]Stern, *The Genius*, 13–36. Many reviewers thought that Stern overstates his case about the modernity of the Gaon, but they applaud his contextualization. For example, Lawrence Kaplan, "Was the Gaon a Genius?" review of *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* by Eliyahu Stern, *Tablet*, April 3, 2013 (https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/128292/was-the-gaon-a-genius); Marc B. Shapiro, "The Gaon of Vilna: How Modern Was He?" review of *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* by Eliyahu Stern, H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews, July 2013 (www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37984).

[5]Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[6]Mirjam Zadoff, *Werner Scholem: A German Life*, trans. by Dona Geyer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), originally *Der rote Hiob. Das Leben des Werner Scholem* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2014); Jay Howard Geller, *The Scholems: A Story of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[7]Joshua Schreier, *The Merchants of Oran: A Jewish Port at the Dawn of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

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Ultimately, it is somewhat surprising that we do not have more scholarly biographies of Jewish figures beyond religious notables and intellectual heavyweights and that more academic historians of modern Jewry do not see the scholarly potential—or even potential profitability—of writing biographies. (This is, of course, excepting the aforementioned Jewish Lives series, which fills exactly that niche, though it minimizes the critical apparatus appended to the narration.) Todd Endelman has even made the case that scholars should write biographies of unknown or little-known Jews as a way to illuminate social history.[8] Despite its unconventional narrative style, Mintzker's book can serve as a model for writing Central European Jewish biographies, embedded in a larger context and appealing to a variety of readerships.

Additionally, for historians of modern European Jewry—including this author—the trial of Joseph Oppenheimer naturally invites comparisons to other anti-Semitic trials, such as the Tiszaeszlár affair; the Xanten and Konitz affairs; and the trials of Alfred Dreyfus, Leopold Hilsner, and Menachem Mendel Beilis, not to mention Leo Frank in the United States. In fact, the Jew on trial is a common theme in Jewish historiography, including several relatively recent monographs and edited volumes.[9]

Although antisemitism underpinned all of the aforementioned cases, several particularly focused on the accusation of Jewish ritual murder. Scholars have noted that belief in the blood libel precipitously declined in Central and West Europe, particularly in Protestant lands, beginning in the sixteenth century. However, this belief remained popular in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and later the Russian Empire, where Christian clergy—particularly Catholic clergy—legitimated the charge of ritual murder, and local oral culture perpetuated it even before the profusion of popular print culture.[10] By the late nineteenth century, the belief reemerged in Central Europe, leading to several major ritual-murder trials, hundreds of thousands of editorials and articles, and even parliamentary debates on the topic.[11]

[8]Todd M. Endelman, *Broadening Jewish History: Towards a Social History of Ordinary Jews* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

[9]Andrew Handler, *Blood Libel at Tiszaeszlar* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1980); Julius H. Schoeps, "Ritualmordbeschuldigung und Blutaberglaube: Die Affäre Buschhoff im niederrheinischen Xanten," in *Köln und das rheinische Judentum*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz et al. (Cologne: J. P. Bachem, 1984), 286–99; Albert S. Lindemann, *The Jew Accused: Three Anti-Semitic Affairs (Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank), 1894–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002); Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Eugene M. Avrutin, *The Velizh Affair: Blood Libel in a Russian Town* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Hillel J. Kieval, *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder in Fin de Siècle Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). The endurance of the blood libel in East Europe is a theme of Eugene M. Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, and Robert Weinberg, eds., *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond: New Histories of an Old Accusation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

[10]R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 136–96; Zenon Guldon and Jacek Wijaczka, "The Accusation of Ritual Murder in Poland, 1500–1800," *Polin* 10 (1997): 99–140; Avrutin, *The Velizh Affair*, 6–12; Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia*, 5, 7; Eugene M. Avrutin, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, and Robert Weinberg, "Introduction," in *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond*, 5.

[11]Hillel J. Kieval, "The Rules of the Game: Forensic Medicine and the Language of Science in the Structuring of Modern Ritual Murder Trials," *Jewish History* 26, nos. 3–4 (2012): 287–88.

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The blood libel was not incidental to these cases, but rather integral to them. To name one example, the investigation and trial of Mendel Beilis in Kiev in 1911–1913 was fundamentally about the allegation of ritual murder. Even when it was clear that there was insufficient evidence to convict Beilis of homicide, the prosecution made it an overt goal to prove that Jews engaged in ritual murder, and confirming or rejecting this allegation was one of the tasks entrusted to the jury.[12] This contrasts with the arrest, investigation, and trial of Joseph Oppenheimer, as Mintzker notes. The prosecution accused him of financial corruption, subversion of Jewish residential restrictions, and sexual misconduct with Christian women, but the allegations against him did not include accusations of ritual murder. In fact, for all the disapprobation that Oppenheimer faced, fantastical, superstitious beliefs about Jewish religious practice did not inform the indictment. Indeed, the situation was more complicated than one might expect. The investigating magistrates did not "leave any record of Jew-baiting before Oppenheimer's trial," and "despite the obvious anti-Jewish sentiments of some members of the court, one cannot reduce Oppenheimer's case to Judeophobia alone." Mintzker continues, "Despite the occasional religious overtones, [magistrate Philipp Friedrich] Jäger's *species facti* was primarily about administration and politics, and only indirectly about religion or ethnicity."[13]

The late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century trials were in many ways a throwback to the medieval era, but they were decisively different in some significant ways. As Hillel Kieval has written, the application of modern science, itself a product of belief in rationality, became central to proving (or confirming) an irrational, premodern belief in Jewish criminality.[14] By the 1880s, science, including forensics, could not be ignored, and was even marshaled in support of allegations of ritual murder. Moreover, this use of science was not limited to the effort to appeal to juries and judges. As Robert Weinberg has argued, the trial of Mendel Beilis and the supposedly expert testimony brought to bear during the trial also were intended to instill belief in Jewish nefariousness to a wider, even international, audience in a modern, ostensibly rational age.[15] By contrast, in Oppenheimer's time, the inferior status of the Jew was assumed. Oppenheimer having dared to have a lifestyle that was a simulacrum of that of non-Jewish German elites exacerbated his plight.[16]

Incidentally, though the most famous modern ritual-murder trials took place in Russia and Austria-Hungary, supposedly enlightened Prussia was not immune to this phenomenon. Popular belief in the blood libel informed the murder trials of Jewish butchers both in Catholic Xanten (Rhine Province) 1891–1892 and in predominately Protestant Konitz (West Prussia) in 1900–1901. Though neither higher state nor church authorities countenanced the accusation of ritual murder, the allegations found widespread acceptance among local residents, leading to the ostracization of and violence against the Jewish

[12]Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia*, 46–47, 65–66.

[13]Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 98, 99.

[14]Kieval, "The Rules of the Game," 289, 306–07.

[15]Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia*, 14.

[16]Needless to say, economic jealousy also underpinned many of the accusations of ritual murder leveled at Jews in small towns in Russia and Poland, where middle- and upper-middle-class Jews lived in close proximity to working-class Christians. Eugene M. Avrutin, "Ritual Murder in a Russian Border Town," *Jewish History* 26, nos. 3–4 (December 2012): 316–18.

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residents, who had enjoyed generally decent relations with their non-Jewish neighbors before these incidents.[17]

That said, what stands out both for the scholar of Jewish history and for Jewish popular memory is not the similarity between the Oppenheimer case and other, later trials, but rather the difference. The Oppenheimer case looms large in memory because of its gruesome denouement and its later instrumentalization by the Nazis, but the actual role of anti-Semitism or Judeophobia was quite different from the various ritual-murder cases. Indeed, the political nature of Oppenheimer's arrest and trial calls to mind the case of Dreyfus more than that of Beilis.

Naturally, there were significant differences between Alfred Dreyfus and Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, chief among them the fact that Dreyfus was a fully enfranchised citizen of an egalitarian republic, not merely the tolerated subject of a monarch. However, noteworthy similarities also exist. Most importantly, neither man was initially targeted by the judicial authorities solely because he was a Jew, yet both affairs unleashed public anti-Jewish vitriol.[18] In both cases, that a Jew could have such an important role in the government or the military was an affront to traditionalist and nativist sensibilities, and anti-Semitism "was able to clothe itself in the garb of order, to pose as the defender of … society against an 'invasion' of outsiders."[19] Also notable is that neither Oppenheimer nor Dreyfus was traditionally religious or engaged in Jewish communal activities. In fact, Oppenheimer differed from most early modern court Jews (or court factors, *Hoffaktoren*) in that he had ceased living in accordance with Jewish law, not to mention his ostentatious lifestyle. Although Alfred Dreyfus was married by a rabbi—in contrast to his brother Mathieu—and had indirect ties to French Jewish elites, he was not religious. Additionally, he was considered aloof or distant by his colleagues, and he was conspicuously wealthy for an army officer.[20] Critically, neither man had a patron to protect him—Oppenheimer because of the death of Duke Charles Alexander and Dreyfus because he had not bothered to cultivate a patron among his superior officers. Oppenheimer's fame, or infamy, was preserved in collective memory and spread by Lion Feuchtwanger's 1925 novel and the widely distributed 1940 film.[21] Dreyfus's story has achieved legendary status in no small part through its use by Theodor Herzl and later Zionists.[22] In both cases, political actors made use of these histories, though with wildly different perspectives. The Nazis exploited Oppenheimer's story to

[17]Schoeps, "Ritualmordbeschuldigung und Blutaberglaube"; Smith, *The Butcher's Tale*; Hillel J. Kieval, "*Yahrzeits*, Condolences, and Other Close Encounters: Neighborly Relations and Ritual Murder Trials in Germany and Austria-Hungary," in *Ritual Murder in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Beyond,* 110.

[18]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 98, 205, 281; Lindemann, *The Jew Accused*, 96–98; Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 206–10.

[19]Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation*, 203.

[20]Lindemann, *The Jew Accused*, 98; Michael Burns, *Dreyfus: A Family Affair, 1789–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 80–81, 84–85, 100–01, 440. Alfred Dreyfus also had a Jewish funeral.

[21]Lion Feuchtwanger, *Jud Süss* (Munich: Drei Masken, 1925), published in English as *Power*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: The Modern Library, 1926) and *Jew Süss: A Historical Romance*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: M. Secker, 1926); *Jud Süß*, directed by Veit Harlan (Berlin: Terra Film, 1940). On the story of Oppenheimer in twentieth-century fiction and film, see Susan Tegel, *Jew Süss: Life, Legend, Fiction, Film* (London: Continuum, 2011), 101–97.

[22]On the accuracy of Herzl's Dreyfus legend, see Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 190–200.

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inflame anti-Semitism among non-Jewish Europeans, while Zionists used Dreyfus's story to demonstrate to fellow Jews the persistence of European anti-Semitism and, ultimately, the need for an independent state for the Jews.

The local Jewish reaction to both affairs is also telling. Oppenheimer had his share of rivals, if not enemies, in the Jewish community. Jewish court factors were often in competition with one another or had tense business relations. In fact, many were arrested or feared imminent arrest after Oppenheimer was incarcerated. Some of these court factors felt no sympathy for Oppenheimer, whereas others refused to testify against him. The Dreyfus affair unsettled a community that had felt insecure in its emancipation and had been historically deferential to the French political establishment. French Jews wondered if they and their liberties were expendable, and they felt embarrassment regarding a supposed traitor in their ranks. In the words of one historian, Dreyfus's "arrest, condemnation, and degradation were experienced … as a moment of intense shame," and many Jews shared the popular belief in Dreyfus's guilt. After a period of passivity, silence, and indecision, however, Jewish public figures attempted to rally Republican sentiment and appealed to French humanitarian traditions as they agitated on Dreyfus's behalf.[23] Naturally, such a course of action was neither possible nor really conceivable for Oppenheimer's coreligionists. Simply put, the legal, political, and social position of Jews in the early 1700s differed significantly from that of Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, especially Jews in Republican France. In the end, neither case fundamentally changed the Jewish community itself or its place in the wider, non-Jewish society.

Above all, what Oppenheimer and Dreyfus have in common is that they have become symbols, with evocative power that has far outlasted the immediate ripple effect of their trials. Therein lies the appeal of writing again and again, in a multiplicity of languages, about Oppenheimer and Dreyfus. The mere mention of their names conjures up associations and preconceived notions, rightly or wrongly, of a Jew who, having forged for himself a powerful position in non-Jewish society, found himself persecuted on the basis of his Jewishness.[24] For many observers, their stories demonstrate the fragility of Jewish integration into non-Jewish European society. At the very least, they speak to the issue of non-Jewish acceptance (or rejection) of Jews as fellow citizens or neighbors on ostensibly equal terms. Above all, Mintzker's retelling of Joseph Oppenheimer's story illuminates the complexity of the Jews' place in the eighteenth-century Holy Roman Empire and the precarious power dynamics that characterized their involvement in temporal politics in that last century before emancipation.

[23]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 201–5; Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation*, 203, 226–28; Ruth Harris, *The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (London: Penguin, 2011), 68–72, esp. 68. The official French Jewish community, particularly the *Consistoires*, barely engaged with the Dreyfus affair and did not advocate for him. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation*, 231–38.

[24]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 2.

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Biography or Microhistory?

Sarah Maza

Yair Mintzker's remarkable *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is written as what the author calls a "polyphonic history": because there exist no sources that reliably convey the subjectivity of Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, the court Jew to the Duke of Württenberg famously tried in 1737–1738 and eventually executed, Mintzker proposes to hone in on his central subject via the perspectives of four significant people who interacted with Oppenheimer during and shortly after his trial.[1] Parsing the records left by a judge, a convert from Judaism, a fellow Jew, and a writer, Mintzker brilliantly re-creates Oppenheimer as a "structuring absence"[2] whose essence can best be grasped via the anxieties of those who dealt with him in the last months of his life and the cultural codes they deployed to explain his fate.

In reconstructing the world that made Oppenheimer, Mintzker deploys a dazzling array of methods, some well established and others unconventional: the reader is treated to deep archival plunges into biographical material and social history, but also to biblical exegeses, literary analysis, lengthy transcriptions of several arresting sources, and dialogues between the author and a hypothetical skeptical reader that cleverly push the argument forward at the end of each chapter. Indeed, the overall tenor of the work is heavily dialogic, with conversations opening up within conversations, between Oppenheimer and his interlocutors: the author and his reader, the author and himself. Cumulatively, the approach works: it delivers a mesmerizing reading experience and ample food for thought. But to what end? I propose here to engage with the questions behind the book's central question—How, in the absence of trustworthy sources and the protagonist's own perspective, do we get as close as possible to Oppenheimer?—by asking my own questions about why exactly we are being asked to care about Jew Süss. What are the ultimate stakes of Mintzker's inquiry? In this contribution to the forum, which resonates with some of the themes raised by Jay Geller and Jesse Spohnholz, I will explore the question of whether *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is best understood as a biography or a microhistory. I frame the issue thus not because I believe that a book like this should necessarily fit into one of those genres, but because I hope that posing the question in this way is a good heuristic device for assessing both Mintzker's ultimate purpose and the strategies he employs.

An excellent guide to the distinction between these two genres is Jill Lepore's 2001 article "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," which delineates the characteristics of each while pointing to some slipperiness in the boundary between them.[3] To most historians, the difference between biography and microhistory will seem obvious: biographies are about famous people, whereas microhistories typically

[1]Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 19–22.

[2]Minztker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 175.

[3]Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129–44.

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track the lives of the obscure. But as Lepore points out, such is not always the case. Microhistories can be about people who were famous in their own time—the sixteenth-century traveler and writer Leo Africanus, for instance, or the eighteenth-century speculator and politician William Cooper.[4] Conversely, an ordinary person is sometimes given the full biographical treatment, for instance the eighteenth-century American midwife Martha Ballard, whose life Laurel Thatcher Ulrich chronicled at length precisely in order to make the point that biography should not be reserved for (usually male) members of the social elite.[5] A more significant distinction might be that, as Lepore also proposes, biography always addresses the sweep of a person's life, whereas microhistories, even as they include accounts of their protagonists' full lives, are typically built around a single moment of revelatory crisis. The essential difference, however, resides in the ultimate purpose of each genre: biography seeks to explain the individual, microhistory the world beyond the individual. The first seeks to establish singularity, the second exemplarity.[6]

To which of these two categories does *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* most obviously belong? On the face of it, the book has all of the characteristics of a microhistory. As the court Jew attached to Duke Carl Alexander of Württenberg, Joseph Süss Oppenheimer may have been known to many in his own day, but absent his trial and execution, and even more so his posthumous existence as an avatar of horrific twentieth-century anti-Semitism, he would not be remembered today. Although not poor or illiterate, he fits comfortably into the "obscure person" category; he was not the sort of individual posthumously deemed worthy of biographical attention on account of political, intellectual, or artistic activities or of conspicuous presence in high society.

Further appearing to confirm the book's status as a microhistory is the fact that its very title (including words such as "Deaths," "Notorious Trial and Execution") signals a focus on a moment of crisis rather than a whole life. There exists, of course, no single definition of *microhistory*, and the genre's scope and purpose have in the past been the object of considerable debate.[7] Works labeled microhistory have included everything from minute explorations of specific locales (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's Montaillou, for instance) to the most popular recent template, the stories of obscure individuals such as John Hu, Elizabeth Marsh, or Domingos Álvares, who crossed oceans and encountered unfamiliar cultures.[8] The most famous microhistories, name-checked in every discussion of the genre, do, however, focus on a moment of crisis, a break in the normal order of things, which involves

[4]Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteeenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

[5]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 131; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

[6]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 133.

[7]On the disagreements among early groups of microhistorians, see David Bell, "Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms," in *The Blackwell Companion to Western Historical Thought,* ed. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (London: Blackwell, 2002), 269–73, and more broadly Sigurdur Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Sjijártó, eds., *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[8]Jonathan Spence, *The Question of Hu* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Anchor, 2008); James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

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or portends violence. Whether telling of the discovery of the fake Martin Guerre's identity, the arrest of the heretical miller Menocchio, or the torture and killing of animals by printers' apprentices in eighteenth-century Paris, the iconic microhistory is built around, or builds up to, a moment of intense drama.[9] Here again, Oppenheimer's story more than fits the bill, starting with a sudden reversal of fortune and climaxing in a hideous, grandly theatrical execution.

The Many Deaths of Jew Süss also resembles many microhistories in its very style. Lepore observes that microhistorians often resort to unconventional devices in framing their narratives.[10] The genre was launched by historians of early modern Western societies whose urge was to bring to life the worlds of marginalized people: wanting to tell a great story but typically facing a paucity of sources, they resorted to imaginative speculation, sprinkling their prose with "must haves" and "might haves," or using downright invention such as creating imaginary thoughts for their subjects. Because the style of a microhistory is often both intimate and speculative, authorial presence is typically more conspicuous than in other genres of historical writing. That presence can be implicit, as the writer openly divulges gaps in the evidence and leaps of faith, or quite explicit, as when Natalie Davis opens her *Women on the Margins* with a conversation between herself and her three cranky, skeptical protagonists.[11] Mintzker's authorial presence is most concrete in the conversations with an imagined reader that punctuate the book, but almost as explicit in the candor with which he admits to the limitations of the sources he really needs and the methodological experiments he therefore conducts in search of the elusive Oppenheimer.

Lepore also notes that the author's presence has often featured clearly in microhistory because so many classics in this mode are framed as mysteries or puzzles, with the writer taking on the role of the detective; indeed, the person who arguably invented the genre, Carlo Ginzburg, sprinkles his writings with words such as "clues" and "enigma" and has repeatedly invoked Sherlock Holmes as his model.[12] Lepore goes further, proposing that because the protagonists of microhistories are often people with unsavory reputations, writers commonly identify not with the main personage but with the investigator or judge who looks into their deeds and passes sentence upon them.[13] Natalie Davis, for one, does not hide her admiration for Jean de Coras, judge in and chronicler of the Martin Guerre case, whom she views as sympathetic to religious minorities, women, and the lower orders.[14] Mintzker, on the other hand, does not appear particularly drawn to any among his quartet of voices, least of all to judge Philipp Jäger, whom he describes as a

[9]Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. Anne and John Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75–104.

[10]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 137, 142.

[11]Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–4.

[12]Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9, no. 1 (1980): 5–36; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[13]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 139–40.

[14]Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 94–113.

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man of deep prejudices, a frustrated careerist who projected his own jealous disappointment onto the accused. The judge's indictment of Oppenheimer, in Mintzker's view, was "[b]ased on rumors, gossip, outright lies and (at best) half-truths … [and] is one of the most radical and fictive versions of Jew Süss ever written."[15]

Investigators and judges in the past and sleuthing historians in the present loom large in the genre because, as Lepore observes, microhistories revolve around "people whose incompletely documented lives point historians toward a single question shrouded in mystery: Where did Menocchio get the idea that the world was born in putrefaction? Did Bertrande de Rols lie about Martin Guerre? Why was Hu locked up? Why wouldn't Eunice return to Deerfield?"[16] Not all microhistories follow this template, and *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* certainly does not conform to it. Although it asks many questions along the way, the book proposes no big central mystery. Why was Joseph Süss Oppenheimer allowed to flourish, and then suddenly scapegoated and killed? There are convincing time-and-place specific answers to that question, which Mintzker duly provides, but to anyone remotely familiar with Jewish history, the larger answer is painfully un-mysterious. This sort of puzzle, though, is not Mintzker's concern, and therein lies the most compelling reason for reading his book as other than a microhistory.

The microhistorian, Lepore argues, is not fundamentally invested in her or his protagonist. Natalie Davis may be the exception here, because her affect, though not uncritical, tends toward the romantically empathetic—whether toward Arnaud du Tilh and Bertrande de Rols, Leo Africanus, or the trio of self-actualizing characters in *Women on the Margins*. More often, though, as Lepore suggests, microhistorians' protagonists are devices rather than beloved alter egos.[17] Their stories are useful for drawing the reader in, but less an end in themselves than the means of accessing a broader question of historical culture: What was the nature of identity in premodern Europe? How did members of the "lower" orders encounter, appropriate, and reshape elite culture in early modern Italy? How could eighteenth-century apprentices express anger at their masters in a rigidly hierarchical artisanal culture? In the early 1700s, what features of Native American mores would be more appealing to a young Englishwoman than her own culture of origin? These are the central questions of classic works by Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton, and John Demos, and they connect to fundamental areas of historical inquiry.

Here is the main characteristic of microhistory, the one that differentiates it most sharply from biography: however appealing its central drama, a microhistory aims to make a point about the historical landscape behind the story. In the essay that laid the theoretical foundations for the genre, Clifford Geertz describes a drama involving burglary, murder, a breathtaking escape, and a sheep raid. Through the alchemy of thick description, the story reveals the unspoken assumptions—typically puzzling ones to the modern reader—about honor and justice shared (though not equally) by Moroccan tribesmen, Jewish merchants, and French colonial authorities.[18] Although intriguing characters and good stories are selling points for microhistory (literally so, because such books nearly always make bids for lay readership

[15] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 95.

[16] Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 133. The latter is a reference to another classic microhistory; see John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

[17] Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 144.

[18] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 3–30.

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and course adoption) they are not, conceptually, the purpose of the exercise. This point is applicable, I would argue, even to what one might call mega-microhistories, the broadest, most resonant accounts of a small event that shed light on large issues.

A particularly apposite example here is another instance of judicial anti-Semitism, the Dreyfus case. The 1894 framing of Captain Alfred Dreyfus for treason, and the subsequent dramatic events of his conviction, imprisonment, and eventual exoneration, have gripped the hearts and minds of generations, as they did contemporaries of the case.[19] However much one might admire Dreyfus the man or deplore his fate, however, the myriad classic narratives of *l'affaire* (as it is still known in France) are not biographies but, generically, microhistories: the particular story of what happened to Dreyfus matters because it revealed and intensified the nation's bitter division between a blood-and-soil nationalist political right and its secular universalist republican opponents. It dramatized a fundamental sociopolitical antagonism that reverberated through the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in the Vichy regime. Alfred Dreyfus as a person was only contingently involved in this extended historical drama.

If we accept a definition of *microhistory* as a particular story that illuminates a larger historical issue, then *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* does not fit the bill. This is not to say that Mintzker fails to use the Oppenheimer case to uncover important elements of its historical context—quite the opposite. The story of each protagonist illuminates a different facet of historical experience. Judge Philipp Jäger's story offers vivid details about the career of a hardworking, ambitious youth from a small town and establishes the multiple connections (from common historical actors to structural similarities) between the Oppenheimer affair and the sudden imprisonment and judicial persecution of Christina von Würben-Grävenitz, longtime mistress to Duke Eberhard Ludwig, six years earlier. Each of the chapters confounds any simple view of a monolithic Christian-Jewish split in eighteenth-century Württemberg. Jäger's hostility to Oppenheimer had many more causes than the anti-Jewish prejudice he certainly harbored. The convert Christoph David Bernard learned about Christianity in a seminary where he also taught Hebrew and Aramaic and practiced theological disputations that would inform his encounter with Oppenheimer. Chapter 3 introduces us, through the figure of Mordechai Schloss, to fractious communities of Jewish businessmen just as likely to help put one another in jail as to give one another assistance. Finally, the Lutheran writer David Fassmann, author of many "dialogues of the dead," had no sympathies for Jews in general or Oppenheimer in particular, but nonetheless produced a heart-rending account of Oppenheimer's execution from the point of view of the condemned. Thanks to Mintzker's prodigious research, all of these different characters and settings behind the case come into view, but none are the author's ultimate focus. His gaze is trained on the ever-elusive Oppenheimer. To this reader, at least, it seems clear that *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is not a microhistory but a biography, albeit a highly unusual one.

In a couple of key aspects noted previously, Mintzker's study departs from the usual model of biographical writing: it does not concern a person of significant achievement or influence, and its focus is not on a whole life but on a specific moment of crisis. Why call it a biography, then? Because however much Mintzker digs into context and background,

[19] The classic and most exhaustive account is Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus,* trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (London: George Braziller, 1986); the most recent prominent treatment is Ruth Harris, *Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair That Divided France* (London: Penguin, 2011).

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it becomes increasingly clear as the work progresses that the protagonist, Oppenheimer himself, is its true object. Lamenting a lack of reliable sources in his introduction, Mintzker makes clear that he wishes to establish some sort of truth, however tentative, about the man himself. Historians, he writes, "possess few documents about Oppenheimer's early career, but what they have is fairly reliable," whereas the massive archive relating to the last months of his life "is extremely tendentious."[20] Neither contemporaries nor later historians, he continues, have been able to grasp with certainty what Oppenheimer had done to get into trouble, what it meant at the time, "and how Oppenheimer himself experienced his rise, fall, and violent death."[21] That last phrase is telling: although the book offers a treasure trove of historical discoveries, in the end Mintzker seems most driven by the desire to get close to Oppenheimer, to gain access to his subjectivity.

Jill Lepore argues that affective investment in the subject is typical of biography rather than microhistory. Biographers typically "love too much," sometimes to such an extent that love can turn to hatred or betrayal; their affect toward their subject is "more like that of a crazed stalker than that of a faithful husband."[22] Microhistorians are less likely to fall in love with their subjects, she posits, because the latter are more akin to devices than to real people.[23] Lepore's blunt distinction admits to many exceptions and shadings. We can all think of microhistorians—Natalie Davis again comes to mind, but she is far from the only one—who appear enamored of their subjects, and the word *love* hardly conveys the complicated feelings that biographers of racists, criminals, or dictators harbor toward their protagonists. As a general proposition, though, Lepore's point reinforces the view that biographers write "to" their subjects while microhistorians write "through" them.

By this definition, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is indeed a biography. Mintzker's introduction hones in on the problematic nature of the sources relating to the case and bemoans that because of their varying agendas later historians have never been able to understand Oppenheimer on his own terms.[24] Although the book has more than one purpose, the recovery of Oppenheimer's point of view, of his subjectivity, recurs so frequently—especially in Mintzker's conversations with his reader—as to emerge as the central concern. In his introduction, Mintzker explains the purpose of his polyphonic method: "[W]e are about to see Oppenheimer portrayed from different angles." Expanding on his approach at the end of the chapter on Judge Jäger, Mintzker offers analogies to hearing one side of a telephone conversation or reconstructing a game of chess from only one color's moves.[25] While pushing back against historians who claim that the sources explicitly convey Oppenheimer's voice, Mintzker admits, about two-thirds of the way through: "You are right: Oppenheimer is the book's absent center; he is its pictorial negative space, its structuring absence."[26]

Nor is the pursuit of Oppenheimer's subjectivity a purely intellectual endeavor. As the study reaches its concluding sections, it becomes increasingly clear that the project is an ethical one, a historian's pursuit of empathy for a person long dead. Mintzker's motivation

[20]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 7.
[21]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 10.
[22]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 134.
[23]Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much," 144.
[24]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 10.
[25]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 101.
[26]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 174.

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comes into focus in his discussion of Mordechai Schloss and Callman Seligmann's *The Story of the Passing of Jew Süss*, which he reads as a text that, in allegorical fashion, gives voice to Oppenheimer's side of the story, fulfilling the captive's final request. On the subject of their book, Mintzker remarks that "composing or reading a text can also be a simple act of kindness."[27] Clearly, he has in mind his own book too, whose purpose he confirms in an eloquent concluding passage. Exposed to the reaction of several people who spent time with Oppenheimer, we the readers experienced the world as he did in the weeks before his death, and therefore have shared his perspective. It is no accident that we have not seen more of the protagonist, Mitzker audaciously concludes, because we have been positioned alongside him, "we have stood in Oppenheimer's shoes all along."[28] For the author and the reader, this act of empathy is the *mitzvah* that provides the rationale for the work.

In arguing that *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is a biography, I seek to illuminate what I see as the productive tension throughout the book between its positivistic rationale and its postmodern methods. With very rare exceptions, such as Edmund Morris's *Dutch*, the methodological posture behind biography is almost inevitably (and understandably) positivistic: however much the biographer may have an "angle," her primary mission is to come as close as possible to the facts of the person's life through examining the most exhaustive documentation.[29] Mintzker aligns himself with this posture in the opening pages of the book: he critiques the sources about Oppenheimer, bemoaning their lack of trustworthiness. The historian, he writes, "should never stop treating the sources critically. He or she should strive to differentiate between what is historically verifiable and what is probably or manifestly false."[30] An unimpeachable statement, to be sure, but also one that could have been written a century ago, and certainly a credo most biographers would echo.

But this old-fashioned commitment to the pursuit of an objective truth comes wrapped in the skeptical, postmodern ethos characteristic of most microhistories. There is the polyphonic design, which suggests that no single voice can be trusted to capture reality. Three of the four sections use literary analysis to capture the essence of their protagonists' understanding of Oppenheimer. The author's dialogues with the reader further destabilize the book's analysis at the same time as they keep the author and his choices in full view of the reader. Biography as a genre tends to erase the author, seeking to grant the reader unmediated closeness to the book's subject. Writers of microhistories, on the other hand, are often candid about their choices and motivations: Natalie Davis famously introduces *The Return of Martin Guerre* as "in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past."[31] Mintzker likewise bemoans historians' attachment to the narrative techniques of Western realism and is not shy about delivering the occasional postmodern sounding statement ("Sometimes fiction precedes history by serving as its script"[32]). The very polyphonic structure of the book suggests a certain skepticism about ultimate truths.

[27]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss,* 228.
[28]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 283.
[29]Edmund Morris, *Dutch* (New York: Ramdom House, 1999) is an authorized biography of Ronald Reagan. It caused controversy because Reagan's life was told through the voice of a fictional character, a stand-in for the author, and the book contained invented material.
[30]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 19.
[31]Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 5.
[32]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 282.

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Therein lies the methodological paradox of this biography clad in microhistorical garb. The virtuoso techniques of postmodernism (the blurring of fact and fiction, an acknowledged authorial presence, a multi-perspectival approach) are pressed here into the service of a traditional biographer's goal: getting to "the truth" about the man whose caged body was hoisted atop the gallows outside Stuttgart on February 4, 1738. Most works of history are driven by a mixture of their author's documentary, interpretive, emotional, and political agendas, none of which are necessarily spelled out. But *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is a highly self-conscious exercise, so it seems only fair to ask of its author: Why, exactly, should we care about Joseph Süss Oppenheimer?

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A Polyphonic Microhistory: Yair Mintzker and the Opportunities of Historical Scale

Jesse Spohnholz

In *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, Yair Mintzker offers a methodology—polyphonic history—aimed at solving problems faced by historians attempting to understand events for which all the surviving evidence is problematic and polemical. At its core, Mintzker's polyphonic history asks the historian to look for the *production* of that kind of evidence in the personal biographies of its producers but also in the larger political, economic, social, and cultural transformations shaping their lives. Polyphonic history allows Mintzker to identify multiple, overlapping stories. Thus, instead of recounting the life and notorious death of Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, Mintzker turns his historical gaze on Philipp Friedrich Jäger, Christoph David Bernard, Mordechai Schloss, and David Fassmann—four men who played a role in framing what we know today about Oppenheimer. Looking for evidence of each man's motives helps us understand why they told Oppenheimer's story the way they did. In the process, Mintzker demonstrates that each of these individuals also presented—or, better yet, performed—a certain version of himself for various audiences. Polyphonic history offers Mintzker a powerful tool to complicate metanarratives in German history that treat anti-Semitism as a self-evident explanation for judicial violence against Jews.

Although Mintzker presents polyphonic history as *sui generis*, there is merit to reflecting on how the author draws on a deep historiographical tradition of microhistory, a term that the author does not use to describe his book. My contribution to this forum thus considers *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* as standing in a long line of microhistories.[1] I will begin by defining the genre before I consider a series of critiques that have been raised against microhistory, not to relitigate old arguments but to consider how well Mintzker's book fares under the weight of those challenges. Ultimately, Mintzker uses polyphonic history to demonstrate that Oppenheimer's trial and guilt were not the predetermined result of some fixed, monolithic anti-Semitism; instead they were the contingent outcome of acts taken by various actors, many of whom were anti-Semitic. What Mintzker's polyphonic history cannot do, however, is explain *how* that contingent outcome later came to be seen as predetermined. I conclude by suggesting a set of other methodological approaches that can solve this problem.

My definition of *microhistory* is open and inclusive. Its only defining characteristic is the reduction of scale of the historical subject to one narrowly defined event, relationship, person, or object, so that factors or developments appear that otherwise might not be perceptible.[2] What

[1]For this essay, I reviewed sixteen microhistories (not all of which self-identified as such) published between 1979 and 2014. Because the most robust tradition of microhistories has come out of early modern European history and because early modern Europe is my research specialization as well as Mintzker's, I limited my reflection to books within that subfield. In the interest of space, I will refrain from citing them all.

[2]Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 97–98.

Here I distinguish microhistories from biographies, which need not offer new insights beyond their

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I find most promising about microhistory is that by changing the scale of observation, historians gain new perspectives that can transform understandings of how and why larger-scale developments took place.[3] Microhistories can help us see how the outcomes of events were the products of many complicated and contingent decisions made by all sorts of people, not just political, social, or cultural elites.[4] Microhistories prioritize three central principles of historical inquiry—context, contingency, and complexity—as a way of deepening our historical understanding of change and causality.[5] Intentionally or not, reducing scale in this way also pushes against what some historians see as the tendency of projects framed on a larger scale—whether nationalism, materialist structuralism, *histoire totale*, or now "big history"—to hew too close to determinism. Instead, microhistories emphasize human agency and the contingency of outcomes.

Mintzker's book fits well within my loose definition.[6] Of course, by describing *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* as a microhistory, it is not my intent to refute Mintzker's claims to originality. I am happy to admit that his polyphonic method is distinct from other microhistories. Rather, my point is that Mintzker's polyphonic history required that he first adopt a microhistorical approach, which in turn allowed him to present a complicated picture of how intolerance functioned in early modern Europe.

The Many Deaths of Jew Süss also has qualities not essential to the genre of microhistory, but which are common features of it. Many microhistories, for instance, focus on trial records and thus have a tendency to emphasize conflicts between individuals or between individuals and the state. Another common feature is the willingness of authors of microhistories to insert their voices into the analysis and narrative. Mintzker does this with his four conversations with an imaginary reader—a rhetorical device that bears some similarity to one used by Natalie Zemon Davis.[7] Other authors of microhistories embrace their subjectivity in other ways, by introducing autobiographical reflections, by walking their reader through their uncertainties, or by admitting when they are using their imagination because the surviving evidence has proven insufficient. Microhistorians also seem particularly willing to blur the line between literature and history, whether because they emphasize the role of narrative, because they borrow literary conventions like the *dramatis personae* of a play,[8] or because

subjects. Though there may be overlap, biographies by nature have a single person as their subject, whereas microhistories might be framed in all sorts of manners. See also Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, "The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge," *The Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (2003): 701–35.

[3]See Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann, "How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1431–72.

[4]John Brewer, "Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 87–109; Francesca Trivellato, "Microhistoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, no. 1 (2015): 122–134.

[5]Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically?" *Perspectives on History*, January 1, 2007 (https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically).

[6]Sarah Maza's contribution in this forum suggests that Mintzker's book constitutes a "biography clad in microhistorical garb" because of Oppenheimer's centrality to *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*. I argue the opposite for the reasons described following.

[7]Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[8]David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144–45; Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta and*

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(like Mintzker) they find value in literary allusions. To my mind, none of these features is essential to what defines microhistory, though in style as well as function, Mintzker's book fits the genre. Admittedly, I am a kindred spirit, in the sense that I value imagining ways to solve seemingly intractable historical problems by looking at them from creative rethinkings of scale.[9] However, not all such reimaginings are created equal. Therefore, I would like to consider how well Mintzker's book stands up to three main critiques of microhistories.

First, some critics have suggested that microhistories' narrow focus prevents them from offering conclusions with wider significance. In that sense, they warn, microhistory approaches antiquarianism. Others suggest that microhistories celebrate adding complexity as an end in itself, which they find unsatisfactory. This is how Simon Schama framed the critique nearly forty years ago:

> This "micro-cosmic view" … is in effect a neo-pointillist heresy of immense positivist vulgarity … It is time, perhaps, to reinstate the significance of significance … The signs of a creeping *Montaillou* syndrome are ominous. The local, the anecdotal, the parochial, the gossipy, and the intimate threaten to tyrannise historical fashion.[10]

Similarly and more recently, Naomi Lamoreaux finds it unsatisfactory when microhistories take complicating the past as a sufficient end in itself. "It is important also to 'resimplify,' " she responds, "to fit the evidence into a new interpretive framework."[11] Without the ability to draw wider conclusions, these critics suggest, writing microhistories becomes a practice of scholarly navel gazing.

Second, detractors have suggested that microhistory naively venerates the agency of oppressed people, often explicitly or implicitly turning its subjects into heroes. For these critics, microhistories can serve as mere tools of political activism rather than as products of rigorous scholarly investigation. This was at the core of Thomas Kuehn's critique of Gene Bruckner's *Giovanni and Lusanna* and Robert Finlay's critique of Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*.[12] Critics also note that microhistories are often content with showing the agency of ordinary people, again as an end in itself. Naomi Lamoreaux questions the claim that merely demonstrating that history is the outcome of many people's choices constitutes an original scholarly contribution.[13] Brad Gregory agrees, and he further argues that microhistories' celebration of agency "exaggerates both the fragility of large institutions and the contingency of their development."[14]

Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), xiii–xvii; Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Cunegunde's Kidnapping: A Story of Religious Conflict in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), xv–xvii.

[9]Jesse Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel: The Event that Never Was and the Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[10]Simon Schama, review of Carlo Cipolla's *Faith, Reason and the Plague*, *London Review of Books* 2, no. 18 (September 18, 1980), 22–23 (https://www.lrb.co.uk/v02/n18/simon-schama/the-monte-lupo-story).

[11]Naomi Lamoreaux, "Rethinking Microhistory: A Comment," *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 4 (2006): 556.

[12]Thomas Kuehn, "Reading Microhistory: The Example of Giovanni and Lusanna," *The Journal of Modern History* 61, no. 3 (1989): 512–34; Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 553–51. Finlay's review should only be read alongside Natalie Zemon Davis, "On the Lame," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 3 (1988): 572–603.

[13]Lamoreaux, "Rethinking Microhistory," 559.

[14]Brad Gregory, "Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life," *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 109.

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A third critique is that authors of microhistories are not driven by methodological goals but by their eagerness to engage nonacademic readers, whether to inspire undergraduates or to educate the wider society. After all, microhistories are one of the few genres of historical works written by academics that have a track record of breaking into the mass market. This stems from their potential to take history writing to the level of human emotion in a similar way that novels do.[15] I have not seen this critique explicitly in print, though I have heard it informally from colleagues. Rather than dismissing this perspective as merely a condescending attitude toward popular histories, I will concede that there could be a substantive point here. After all, the goal of microhistories, as I described it earlier, is to reduce the scale of historical investigation so that factors or developments appear that otherwise might not be perceptible. If, however, historians write their histories only to convey to a wider public what was *already perceptible to scholars*, they are engaging in a rather different act: humanizing existing macrohistorical narratives rather than offering new conclusions that help us see beyond what we knew before. This is not inherently problematic—history's ability to appeal to a broad public distinguishes it from many other scholarly disciplines—but it falls outside of my definition of *microhistory*.

There have been individual microhistories vulnerable to these criticisms, but in my view, none of these critiques delegitimizes microhistory as a genre of history writing. Surely, some microhistories risk antiquarianism, but others offer vistas of otherwise unrecognizable facets of the past. Just as surely, some microhistories romanticize their subjects, but others offer insights into people's motivations that enrich our understanding of how and why historical developments unfolded. And, yes, some works that claim to be microhistories might be better described as popular histories or even biographies, but others offer powerful insights that will enrich both specialists and nonspecialists.

How does Mintzker's *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* stand up when placed against this backdrop? In my view, very well. The book proves capable of engaging specialists and nonspecialists alike, avoids romanticizing Oppenheimer, and offers new insights on enduring historical metanarratives.

The metanarratives looming over *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* relate to anti-Semitism. One of these is biblical. It sees reflections of the trial and execution of Joseph Oppenheimer in the sufferings of God's chosen people described in the Tanakh. This story does not have a beginning, middle, and end so much as it has (in common Jewish understandings of time) a beginning (the covenant), a very long middle (the history of the Jewish people), and an anticipated end (messianic redemption). However, Mintzker's book speaks also to another, more explicit metanarrative. The ominous image from the advertising poster for the 1940 film *Jud Süss* reproduced opposite page one of the book reminds readers of a narrative of anti-Semitism linked to the development of German nationalism. If this story has a beginning, it is perhaps Martin Luther's nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to a church door on October 31, 1517 (regardless of whether that event really happened or was merely later popularized as useful propaganda for the Reformation). Within this metanarrative, Oppenheimer's case offers one of many examples in the middle of the

[15] Indeed, microhistories have served as the inspiration for historical fiction, including Charmaine Craig's 2002 bestselling novel *The Good Men*, inspired by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (www.charmainecraig.com/thegood-men), or Lillian Groag's play *Menocchio*, inspired by Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, which premiered the same year (https://www.berkeleyrep.org/season/0203/menocchio.asp).

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story, while the Shoah stands as an implicit end. Equipped with either metanarrative, one need not go further to explain the outcome of Oppenheimer's trial. In the first, his Jewishness alone is sufficient to explain his earthly suffering. In the second, the fact that he was Jewish and lived in the lands that would become the modern nation-state of Germany is sufficient to explain the outcome.

This is where Mintzker uses microhistory so incisively. The author admits the futility of trying to recover the agency of the oppressed—Oppenheimer—and instead aims at recovering the agency of those people who produced extant evidence concerning his trial.[16] Mintzker starts by taking a deep dive into a microhistory of the trial through the lens of the judge, Philipp Friedrich Jäger. Here, five points come to light that force an innovative retelling of Oppenheimer's trial. First, and least surprisingly, Jäger was immersed in anti-Semitic attitudes common in the Holy Roman Empire (and elsewhere) in the early eighteenth century.[17] Second, and more surprisingly, in an earlier trial of the Duke of Württemberg's former mistress, Christina Wilhelmina von Würben (née Grävenitz), Jäger had acted *in defense of* Württemberg's Jewish community.[18] Third, Jäger resented the role Oppenheimer had played in negotiating the settlement between Würben and the duke. Fourth, Jäger was a member of a social group (the *Ehrbarkeit*, the worthies) whose members were frustrated because of their increasing distance from the duke.[19] Thus, the judge proved more interested in Oppenheimer's effort to divide the duke from the *Ehrbarkeit* than in anti-Semitic tropes. Finally, the fact that Jäger became a judge in Oppenheimer's case was only the result of a series of coincidences and convergences, not a strategic decision by any one person.[20] Thus, Mintzker recovers Jäger's agency in the trial—stacking the deck against Oppenheimer—as part of a very personal story, without romanticizing Jäger.

Later chapters serve similar functions. Christoph David Bernard's story of his meeting with Oppenheimer before the latter's execution reflected his own efforts to present himself as a loyal convert, but it also revealed his resentfulness of Oppenheimer's success. In the process, Bernard erased the diversity among the Jews within Oppenheimer's social, familial, and professional networks. Bernard knew full well that not all Jews were on good terms with Oppenheimer. To promote his own floundering career and to challenge the widespread stigma that Jewish converts retained their allegiance to Judaism, however, Bernard presented Oppenheimer as part of a Jewish conspiracy against Württemberg's authorities.[21]

Mintzker's attention to Mordechai Schloss proves helpful as well. It turns out that Oppenheimer had recently replaced Schloss as the duke's leading court Jew.[22] When Schloss was questioned about Oppenheimer in September 1737, he initially hesitated to speak against his rival, but out of fear for his life, he eventually provided testimony that Oppenheimer had stolen, lied, and cheated the duke and members of his government.[23] Later, Schloss was one of two coreligionists who met with Oppenheimer (with Bernard

[16]Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 11–22.
[17]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 92–93.
[18]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 45–53, 94–95.
[19]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 30–31
[20]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 55–57.
[21]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 109–12, 130, 137, 164–70.
[22]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 184–97.
[23]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 206–08.

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present) to offer spiritual comfort on his deathbed. He also coauthored with his son-in-law a book that included a description of that encounter, which in turn fit into a genre of Jewish literature describing criminals who repented and then became righteous martyrs.[24] Thus, there was considerable diversity and complexity in the relationships among Württemberg's Jews. Moreover, Schloss's behavior toward Oppenheimer was not consistent but depended on specific circumstances.

In the final chapter, David Fassmann's views about Oppenheimer and Judaism also appeared inconsistent and malleable, according to the rhetorical uses to which this hack author living in eighteenth-century Leipzig put Oppenheimer.[25] In this case too, the practice of anti-Semitism becomes a subtler, more complex and contingent factor than the umbrella term *anti-Semitism* can capture.

Of course, Mintzker does not deny the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism—one finds its effects all through *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*. Rather, he historicizes it at a microscopic level so that it becomes less essentialized and self-evident, even as it becomes more human and realistic. The goal of a good microhistory is not just to recover agency or to complicate narratives, but thereby to allow us to see things we could never see otherwise and to gain meaningful understanding of the past through the process. In that, Mintzker succeeds admirably.

I do have some quibbles with *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, though none pertain to my comments about Mintzker's methods as a microhistorian. For instance, I find the explanation of his methodology a bit fuzzy.[26] He also probably overstates his case that few twenty-first-century historians have learned lessons from literary postmodernism.[27] In addition, he sometimes adds information merely to humanize his subjects rather than to advance his argument, so it takes longer than I would have preferred to figure out which facts are critical and which are incidental. I anticipate this book is unlikely to be assigned in graduate seminars devoted to historical methodology because, as I read polyphonic history, it requires a pretty specific set of preconditions to be applied to other projects. But none of these relatively minor matters undermine what I think is the real power of Mintzker's book: the use of a creative kind of microhistory to demonstrate that judicial violence against Jews in the early modern Holy Roman Empire cannot simply (or rather, exclusively) be explained with a blunt appeal to anti-Semitism, even in contexts in which anti-Semitism was pervasive. As it happened, the famed trial and execution of Joseph Oppenheimer was the contingent outcome of actions taken by individuals motivated by personal matters that sometimes bore little direct relation to their views about Judaism or Jews, or about the behaviors or characteristics of Joseph Oppenheimer himself.

In sum, Mintzker's polyphonic microhistory displays the wide gap between the historicized and contingent trial of Joseph Oppenheimer and an ahistorical and essentialized anti-Semitism. What it cannot do, however, is *explain how the one transformed into the other*. How is it that contingent outcomes that required such intense scrutiny for Mintzker to understand later hardened into consequences that people saw as so self-evident as to barely require an explanation? Mintzker's polyphonic history provides part of the answer. After all, Jäger, Bernard, Schloss, and Fassmann all ignored evidence and inserted falsehoods into their accounts. But part of

[24] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 208–23.
[25] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 259–60, 262–79.
[26] For instance, Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 18–19.
[27] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 284–85.

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the answer lies in developments in later eras too, when Oppenheimer's case served the interests of people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My point is not meant as a criticism of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* but only as a comment that Mintzker's book raises an important question that polyphonic history on its own is insufficient to answer.

The Many Deaths of Jew Süss raises questions about where master narratives come from and why they prove so enduring, though Mintzker does not address these points explicitly. For this reason, other methodologies are worth considering. It may prove helpful to think across centuries, to follow how various contingent outcomes built on one another over time, intentionally or unintentionally erasing the complexity of court life in eighteenth-century Württemberg and replacing it with metanarratives whose outcomes later historians imagine as self-evident. Taking this approach might help restore contingency not only to Oppenheimer's trial itself (Mintzker's focus) but also to *knowledge about* Oppenheimer and his trial across time. In a way, that project would look a bit like the reception history (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) provided by Susan Teger's *Jew Süss: Life, Legend, Fiction, and Film*, which looks at how ideas about Joseph Oppenheimer became later deployed in various moments to serve specific interests.[28] My proposed version would require chronologically arranged vignettes as well as a through-line that explains how and why ideas about Oppenheimer's trial changed over time, each one layering onto what came before.

Mintzker's book offers an excellent starting point. He lays bare all sorts of historical silences that were intentionally masked by the producers of the records we have regarding Oppenheimer's trial. In this sense, his project bears some similarity to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's call to identify and unmask silences in the production of history. Trouillot identifies four moments in the process of historical production during which people with vested interests in the outcome silence the past: 1) the making of sources, 2) the making of archives, 3) the making of narratives, and 4) the making of history and asserting of its significance.[29] What Mintzker has done pertains to the first phase. Investigating the second phase would involve uncovering how ideas about the trial were stored, how that knowledge was preserved, and what assumptions underpinned its (re)organization. This project would require not polyphonic history but methods promoted by advocates of the "archival turn," like Randolph Head.[30] The third investigation—how facts became ordered into coherent stories—might take its inspiration from Hayden White's analysis of nineteenth-century history writing.[31] And the last would need to examine historiographical debates as well as how ordinary people use histories in their daily lives, perhaps drawing on work by scholars of memory such as Aleida Assmann or Judith Pollmann.[32] No single method offers the silver bullet for historical inquiry, of course. What I am suggesting is that Yair Mintzker's polyphonic history—as a form of microhistory—not only stands on its own, but also allows us to see new possibilities for other methods as well.

[28]Susan Tegel, *Jew Süss: Life, Legend, Fiction, Film* (London: Continuum, 2011).

[29]Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995), 26 and *passim*.

[30]Randolph C. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information and Political Recordkeeping, 1400–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[31]Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[32]Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Mintzker and I

Yair Mintzker

Almost three years after *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* was first published, I am no longer the same person I was while writing it, and the book is not quite the same one I remember having written. Older and a little wiser, I now look at *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* with a mixture of familiarity and surprise: I continue to appreciate some of its merits but also see more clearly many of its faults, and though I still vividly remember what I set out to accomplish in writing it, I keep finding implicit arguments among its pages that I never before had consciously thought about.

Like all books, as soon as *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* was published, it began to take on a life of its own. (*Habent sua fata libelli*, goes the old adage: "Books have their own fates or lives.") Over the past three years, the book has reached thousands of people whom I have never met in person, and readers made sense of it in many contexts and ways I never could have anticipated in advance. Among all its readers, Sarah Maza, Jesse Spohnholz, Jay Geller, and Michael Meng stand out in their erudition and critical edge. I am grateful to these wonderful fellow historians for their engagement with *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, as well as to Monica Black, Mirna Zakić, and Michael Meng (again) for publishing, and indeed soliciting in the first place, the four essays in this truly polyphonic forum.

The following reflections were written in response to these forum essays, essays which made me go back to the book and re-read it closely for the first time since it first came out. I present my thoughts here as a reader of the book rather than as its author, a fact that explains—together with my life-long admiration for Jorge Luis Borges—why I keep making a distinction between who I was when I penned *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* ("Mintzker") and who I am now ("I").[1] What I set out to do in these comments, in other words, is not to circle the wagons and defend the author's "intention," inasmuch as there ever was such a single motivation behind the creation of the book. Rather, I'd like to think about the book from the outside, as it were, and with the benefit of hindsight. Such a critical distance helps to focus the discussion on the book rather than on its author, and to shed light on where *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* has succeeded so far as well as where (and why) it has not.

* * *

The first and most immediate context in which the book seems to have mattered is what one early reviewer called "mainstream historiography."[2] Indeed, three of the four contributors to this forum discuss *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* in these terms. This has to do with the book's

[1]Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964).

[2]Bryan Cheyette, "When Prejudice Deforms the Law," review of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, by Yair Mintzker, *Times Higher Education*. June 7, 2017 (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-the-many-deaths-of-jew-suss-yair-mintzker-princeton-university-press).

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explicit claims and peculiar style, but I think that it also owes something to the particular biography of its author. Princeton University's Department of History, where Yair Mintzker composed *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* between 2012 and 2017, has a long and venerable tradition in European social and cultural history, with an emphasis on the early modern period and the practices of microhistory. It was at Princeton that Natalie Zemon Davis wrote about the curious case of Martin Guerre, Robert Darnton described the Great Cat Massacre, and Linda Colley traced the remarkable ordeals of Elizabeth Marsh. Though not a member of the Princeton faculty himself, Carlo Ginzburg drafted *The Cheese and the Worms* at Princeton's Davis Center for Historical Studies. Making sense of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* as a form of microhistory consequently seems both natural and right.[3]

This interpretation has much to recommend it. As all four contributors insightfully observe, Mintzker's style owes much to his predecessors at Princeton. Sarah Maza, perhaps because of her own Princeton past, is especially sensitive to the implications of this local context. As she explains in her masterful essay in this forum, many of the techniques used in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* come directly from microhistorical studies. They include an attempt to reconstruct a lost social (symbolic) world; the emphasis on a moment of crisis; extensive use of legal sources; concentration on marginal figures; and a special sensitivity to narrative structure and the authorial "I."

And yet, as both Maza and Spohnholz recognize, the label "microhistory" is not completely adequate in describing what *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* does. The issue is not only that Mintzker never uses the term *microhistory* (a point which Spohnholz makes and which I have never previously considered), but also that, despite all its flair and circumstance, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* does not seem to make one decisive historiographical intervention: it does not conclude with an assertive statement about what Joseph Süss Oppenheimer's ordeal ultimately signified. The book's larger message—unlike that of almost every other famous microhistory—remains elusive or perhaps camouflaged.

Considering this issue now from a critical distance, it seems to me that one reason for this elusiveness is to be sought not in Princeton's tradition of microhistorical studies, but in Mintzker's divergence from it. Maza gets close to articulating the problem when she writes that, "Mintzker deploys a dazzling array of methods," though her generosity of spirit leaves her perhaps slightly short of the mark. As opposed to Ginzburg, Davis, and Darnton, who were all deeply influenced by Geertzian thick description, Mintzker's book is much more eclectic in its methodology; it is not dominated by one hegemonic social theory.[4] Thus, in describing the trial of Joseph Oppenheimer, Mintzker uses many (and often conflicting) sociological theories. Among such methods one finds (a partial list): old-style social history, Biblical exegesis, Geertzian thick description, Niklas Luhmann-like

[3]Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75–104; Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. Anne and John Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[4]Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 3–30.

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systems theoretical approach, and echoes of Bourdieu's field theory.[5] Most important of all, perhaps, is Mintzker's use of speech act theory: his attempt to understand not what his sources describe, how they were produced, or even what they signify, but first and foremost what their authors tried to *do* or *perform* by writing them.[6]

Is this book, then, trying to be a curious biography or some kind of Bakhtin-inspired literary creation, as Michael Meng so insightfully observes? Some evidence suggests that it is. *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is influenced by Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and especially his *Dialogic Imagination*, and it echoes, however imperfectly, another famous Russian author—if not Tolstoy, as Meng suggests, then certainly Dostoevsky.[7] (Consider *The Brothers Karamazov* with its emphasis on multiple points of view, a murder, a trial, and a Grand Inquisitor.) Despite Mintzker's protests to the contrary, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is also clearly a type of biography, even if, as Anson Rabinbach once remarked to me, an anti-biographical one. At the heart of the book lies "a pictorial negative space" or "structuring absence" rather than a definitive account of a man's life.[8] Almost all reflections on the book have quoted the relevant passage, with Maza even doing so twice.

But above all else, I now think that the main methodological intervention of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* should not be sought in its relationship to microhistory, biography, or even Bakhtin. The book is much more ambitious, and controversial, than that. At first, Mintzker conceals this aspect of his book by claiming that he developed his polyphonic method in order to deal with the particular case of Jew Süss. In the imaginary dialogues with the reader, however, and especially in the book's conclusion, Mintzker gives the game away. Meng in particular sees through the ploy. On the very last page of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss,* Mintzker argues that historians in general, and not only historians of Oppenheimer's particular case, need to avoid what he calls, "the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of extreme relativism." He continues: "Polyphonic history, rather than being the exception, should really be the norm."[9]

While re-reading the book for this forum, I thought that here especially *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* becomes a real provocation, one directed toward traditional historians and post-modernists alike. *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is a critique of classical historical writing in the sense that it objects to reducing stories to a single, linear narratological structure, wherein the historian "never once stops and says that she doesn't know something" or

[5]An example of systems theoretical analysis in the book is Yair Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 99. Bourdieu's field theory is most recognizable in Mintzker's description of the Jewish community in Stuttgart, see Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 192.

A good introduction to Luhmann's thought in English is Niklas Luhmann, "Interaction, Organization, and Society," in *The Differentiation of Society*, translated by Stephen Holmes and Charles Larmore (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Bourdieu's work is most accessible in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[6]The classic statement of the theory is J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[7]Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1984); Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[8]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 173–74.

[9]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 285.

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that the story "cannot be viewed from other angles as well."[10] The book demonstrates that this pretense of omniscience is absurd vis-à-vis the body of sources in the case of Jew Süss, but also implies that it is untenable as a way of writing history in general. Concomitantly, Mintzker criticizes postmodern historiographical trends. The history of Joseph Oppenheimer is not simply complex; it is emphatically *not* the case that it can be viewed just from *any* angle one would like. Rather, Mintzker argues that the trial of the famous eighteenth-century court Jew consisted of several recognizable threads which can be identified, narrated, analyzed, compared, and explained. According to this historiosophy, not only reductionism to a single narrative is to be avoided, but also the common tendency nowadays to constantly "complexify" the past until not a single stone is left unturned and not a single storyline intact.

* * *

In addition to scholars interested in historical writing as such, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* has also attracted a great deal of attention from students of Jewish history. Indeed, so far the book has mattered more in the field of Jewish history than anywhere else, and more in Israel than in other parts of the world.[11] The four contributors to this forum echo this uneven reception. Thus, while Geller, the Jewish studies scholar, argues that the strength of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* lies in part in its ability to "bring a new angle to [a] well-known story," Maza calls Oppenheimer's historical figure "obscure" and even asks, "Why, exactly, should we care about Joseph Süss Oppenheimer?"[12]

Such wildly different reactions to the story of Oppenheimer's trial demand an explanation. The first to suggest itself is the well-known claim about the insularity of Jewish Studies as a discipline.[13] Jewish history concentrates on a particular set of characters, often deploys its own analytical vocabulary, and uses a distinct body of sources. That an eighteenth-century court Jew is less known to an audience of non-specialists in Jewish history than to scholars in the field might consequently seem almost banal.

Though it is tempting to attribute Oppenheimer's relative obscurity in modern-day America to the insularity of Jewish Studies, the argument is ultimately unconvincing. Oppenheimer's case is quite different from that of the Vilna Gaon, for instance. The figure of Jew Süss was famous among non-Jews even while he lived; he did not write in Hebrew; and, by all accounts, he was far from being an expert in Jewish theology. The reason for his obscurity in the United States is consequently different from that of other figures in Jewish history. Over the past several years, I have slowly come to the conclusion that modern-day America does not need a figure like Jew Süss because it already has a

[10] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 285.

[11] The book was featured on the front page of the leading Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* and was the topic of two television programs, several radio interviews, and much public debate. A Hebrew translation of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is scheduled to come out in spring 2020 with one of the leading trade presses in Israel.

[12] Or another example: While *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* won the National Jewish Book Award, an early reviewer in a Christian publication couldn't but wonder after reading the book, "Who was Joseph Oppenheimer, and why was he killed?" Amy Frykholm, review of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, by Yair Mintzker, *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2017 (https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/who-was-joseph-oppenheimer-and-why-was-he-killed).

[13] See, for instance, Gavin I. Langmuir, "Majority History and Post-Biblical Jews," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 3 (1966): 343–64.

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similar (even if completely fictional) one in Shylock: an iconic figure in the history of anti-Semitism whose story questions whether a Jew can ever be a full member of a Christian society and involves issues of money, sex, and the law.[14] Shylock occupies a unique place in the English-speaking imagination. We would never call him an obscure figure. When this is combined with the fact that most English speakers have never been exposed to the notorious 1940 Nazi movie about Oppenheimer, we begin to see, perhaps, why "Jew Süss" is such a powerfully symbolic figure in Continental Europe, but not in North America or the British Isles.

I was most impressed by Geller's erudite exposition on the place of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* in the long tradition of biographies of famous Jews, as well as his comparison between Oppenheimer and other "Jews on trial," including most importantly Alfred Dreyfus. What perhaps gets a little lost in Geller's piece, however, are two aspects of Jewish history that I now recognize as central to *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*. The first is the issue of the nature of the Jewish community. Though the literature on the topic is vast and often contested, historians generally agree that what made Jewish communal life possible in premodern times were shared institutions and practices.[15] Mintzker's treatment of Frankfurt's *Judengasse* repeats some of these claims.[16] At the same time, however, Mintzker insists that Jews often lived in what he terms "communities of risk." "What held the Jewish community [in Stuttgart] together," he writes, "was not harmonious consensus or common practices, but individual and highly insecure commercial opportunities at a prince's court."[17] Jews were invited to Stuttgart in order to compete against each other, and they remained there, however paradoxical it may sound, not despite but exactly because their community was in a constant state of strife.

With the help of Meng, Spohnholz, and Geller, I can now also see a second issue regarding Jewish history in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss,* which is radically provocative, much like the book's challenge to general historiography. It pertains to the nature of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in early modern Germany. Unlike the older literature on the topic—the work of Jacob Katz is paradigmatic in this respect[18]—*The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* follows recent scholarly trends and explores what Geller calls "the complexity of the Jews' place in the eighteenth-century Holy Roman Empire and the precarious power

[14]About the reception history of the figure of Shylock, see, most importantly, John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1994).

[15]The classic treatment of the topic is Salo Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942). Elisheva Carlebach, the leading historian of early modern German Jews today, has recently repeated the same consensus-based definition of the Jewish community. Elisheva Carlebach, "The Early Modern Jewish Community and Its Institutions," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, The Early Modern World, 1500–1750,* ed. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 168. Two important corrections to such a definition are David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[16]For instance, Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 182.

[17]Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 192.

[18]Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: Free Press, 1961). As recently as 2009, Thomas A. Brady still treated Jews as the ultimate "Other" of early modern Germany, together with heretics and witches. Thomas A. Brady, *German Histories in the Age of Reformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 319–48.

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dynamics that characterized their involvement in temporal politics in that last century before Emancipation." Jews were not just the "other" of early modern Germany, Mintzker claims. Using the book's very structure to demonstrate his point, he shows that Jews were also objects of the law (Jäger); they were important transmitters of scholarly knowledge (Bernard); they played a significant role in the economy of many early modern states (Schloss); and they were active as participants in European court society (Fassmann).[19] Viewed in this light, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* reveals itself to be a kind of historiographical ambush. It lures us in with the promise of a tale about "one of the most iconic figures in the history of anti-Semitism"[20] only to supply a plethora of evidence that, as Spohnholz puts it, "Oppenheimer's trial and guilt were not the predetermined result of some fixed, monolithic anti-Semitism."

* * *

This brings me to one last historiographical conversation in which *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* seeks to intervene, one that is both obvious and strangely neglected, including by the four essays in this forum.

The Many Deaths of Jew Süss is many things, but it is also, as Meng recognizes in the first sentence of his essay, a work of German history. Joseph Süss Oppenheimer is better known in Germany than anywhere else; the sources Mintzker uses are written almost exclusively in German; and the political, legal, economic, and literary contexts the book discusses are all linked to the history of German-speaking lands. Why is it, then, that it has proven more difficult to publish *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* in German than in Hebrew or English? Why has the book attracted less media attention in Germany than in Israel or the United States?[21]

Throughout his book, Mintzker insists that one has to understand texts in their historical context. Only then can one hope to see what specific authors tried to do or achieve by writing a particular piece. The concealed provocations in *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* work relatively well in the context of general historiography and especially Jewish Studies, but they fall on deaf ears in Germany itself. The reason for this seems obvious in retrospect. Before the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, literary treatments of Jew Süss, including in Lion Feuchtwanger's famous novel, presented Oppenheimer in an often-ambiguous light. In 1940, however, the Nazis broke with this tradition, and their anti-Semitic cinematic depiction of Oppenheimer's story has cast a long shadow over all subsequent accounts. Anyone who writes about Joseph Oppenheimer in Germany today has to cope with this legacy, however indirectly; Veit Harlan's *Jud Süss* cannot be unlearnt.[22]

To claim, as Mintzker does, that Oppenheimer's story is not simply about German anti-Semitism goes against the memory culture of the Federal Republic. A microhistory which highlights German anti-Semitism, like Helmut Walser Smith's *The Butcher's Tale* can be,

[19] On the history and current state of the field of early modern Jewish history, see David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), as well as *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 7, cited previously in note 15.

[20] Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, 1.

[21] A German translation of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* is scheduled to appear in 2020 with Vandenhoek & Ruprecht. Only time will tell if this edition will receive much attention in the German press.

[22] Two useful accounts of the reception history of "Jew Süss" are Susan Tegel, *Jew Süss: Life, Legend, Fiction, Film* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011) and especially Barbara Gerber, *Jud Süss: Aufstieg und Fall im frühen 18. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur historischen Antisemitismus- und Rezeptionsforschung* (Hamburg: H. Christians, 1990).

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and was, received with open arms.[23] But what moral aim could Mintzker's argument about Jew Süss possibly achieve in Germany today? The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of Mintzker's arguments about the need for a new type of historical writing. As Joshua Teplitsky argued in a recent review of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* in *The Los Angeles Times*, Mintzker's polyphonic history is a kind of "luxury that we cannot afford when truth claims are at stake,"[24] and where does truth matter more than in the tragic history of German Jews?

I have reason to believe that Mintzker never considered this particular question seriously, nor do I have an adequate response to it even now. When all is said and done, therefore, the reception of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss* teaches us not only about the state of Jewish history and historical writing more generally, but also about the uniquely high stakes in, and the special epistemological status of, Central European history. This is a point, unlike so much else about *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, we can all perhaps agree upon: Sarah Maza and Jesse Spohnholz, Michael Meng and Jay Geller, you, Mintzker, and I.

[23]Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: Norton, 2002).

[24]Joshua Teplitsky, "The Many Tales of Joseph Oppenheimer," review of *The Many Deaths of Jew Süss*, by Yair Mintzker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), *Marginalia: Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 28, 2019 (https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/many-tales-joseph-oppenheimer/).

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