

# The making of a Jewish villain

Joseph Oppenheimer was many things to many people, but he was largely a victim of his own success **By Tibor Krausz**

**YOUR PLACE** in history is secure if nearly three centuries after your death you remain a byword for an entire category of people. Unfortunately for Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, that category has been the vile, depraved and conniving Jew.

It matters little that, as far as we can tell, he was neither vile nor depraved and he connived but little. It's his Jewishness, not his deeds, that has always mattered in the eyes of Jew-haters. Oppenheimer came to be despised less for what he did than for who he was: an uppity Jew who rose above his station in a highly stratified society where Jews were mostly at the bottom and expected to stay there.

That society was in the German duchy of Württemberg in the early 18th century. The son of a humble tax collector in Heidelberg who was born circa 1698, Oppenheimer became, still in his twenties, a "court Jew" for several princes and princelings in the southwest of the Holy Roman Empire. That is to say, he was a trusted moneyman whose financial wizardry benefited cash-strapped nobles and was rewarded with riches and status accordingly.

By 1732, the ambitious German Jew was the confidante and personal adviser of Duke Carl Alexander in Stuttgart, where he would run the local mint and manage the state's finances. Within a few short years, however, the duke died suddenly of a stroke. That very night, on the orders of the new regent, the Jewish factotum was hauled away to jail where he would languish for months. Oppenheimer stood accused of "atrocious crimes": treason, usury, corruption, embezzlement, usurpation of princely powers, and, to top it all off, lechery. He was interrogated, humiliated and tortured by his inquisitors before he was sentenced to death and executed on February 4, 1738. He was only 40.

But that wasn't the end. The luckless Jewish courtier would be tried and retried posthumously down through the decades. In German anti-Semitic folklore, Oppenheimer would remain an embodiment of the crafty,

usurious Jew, who enriched himself at the expense of others. His notoriety reached its climax with the virulently anti-Semitic Nazi film "Jud Süß" (Jew Süß), which portrayed him as a venal and lecherous Iago who, through his machinations, brings ruin to Württemberg and ravishes a gentle German noblewoman out of priapic perversity.

"Jew Süß' is to the German collective imagination what Shakespeare's Shylock is to the English-speaking world," Yair Mintzker, an Israeli historian who teaches at Princeton University, writes in "The Many Deaths of Jew Süß," a creative retelling of Oppenheimer's trials and tribulations. "His steep rise to power and his sudden downfall are the stuff from which great legends are made, complete with inquisitors, lengthy interrogations, torture sessions, a courtroom drama and a horrific verdict."

And a no less horrific execution saw Oppenheimer taken to the gallows in front of some 15,000 spectators. His remains, rather than being accorded a proper Jewish burial as per Oppenheimer's wishes, were placed on a red gibbet and left there to decompose in full view as a warning to other Jews to know their place.

Oppenheimer's trial captivated the duchy's populace at the time and contemporary documents (transcripts, reports, eyewitness accounts, literary treatments) abound. The trouble for historians, Mintzker explains, is that most such sources are unreliable, burying as they do nuggets of truth in reams of innuendo, prejudice, personal bias and flights of fancy. Was the court Jew a crooked schemer who got his just desserts? Or was he a victim of pervasive anti-Jewish sentiments? Cherry-picking your sources could support either conclusion, which is what many historians have tended to do.

Bayes's theorem can help in a case like this to ascertain evidential probabilities. Instead, Mintzker has devised his own method. By the help of his "polyphonic history" he seeks to establish what can be divined about Oppenheimer's trial by examining it through

four different contemporary perspectives: the chief inquisitor, a Jewish proselyte, a Jewish court Jew, and a Lutheran writer. In other words, Mintzker shuns the usual ploy of the historian as a near-omniscient narrator and retells the tale four times through four points of view with four unique viewpoints.

Inevitably, the result is a bit of a mish-mash. Having different observers describe the same event from different angles is a common gimmick in fiction: it can heighten drama, reveal unexpected turns of events and provide valuable psychological insights into the characters. In writing history, Mintzker's approach has that same advantage: it helps delineate rival contemporary views on the historic trial and its varied meanings to those who lived through it.

Rather than impose his own interpretation from on high with the benefit of hindsight, Mintzker wants to allow the historical record to speak for itself from multiple perspectives. This approach enables him to flesh out the biographies of his select protagonists, as can be gleaned from the archives. His aim is to portray them as complex human beings with their own motivations rather than as token figures in a morality play about an innocent Jew and his Judeophobic persecutors.

At times, though, extraneous details get in the way. Thus, for instance, we learn rather more about the day-to-day doings of Philipp Friedrich Jäger, the chief judge-inquisitor, during the trial than some of us would care to know. "All the trial documents afford us now is a receipt by the coachman who drove Jäger [and two other commissars] to the execution site [outside Stuttgart]," Mintzker laments apropos some gaps in the voluminous mounds of extant archival material on Oppenheim's trial. "How [they] came back to the city afterward we simply cannot tell."

It's good to know that Jäger was a pious Christian, a learned jurist and a meticulous investigator. He didn't appear to be particularly antisemitic, either. Yet these qualities didn't stop the judge from impugning Oppenheimer's character on the flimsiest

of evidence. After months of painstaking investigations that yielded little tangible evidence against Oppenheimer beyond hearsay, the judge found him guilty as charged on all counts. He declared the Jew to be a man “without religion, without conscience, without honor, without culture, without loyalty, without faith.”

Warming to his theme, Jäger went on: “[Oppenheimer] nourished himself only on robbery and treachery ... he lived almost like a prince, engaging in prostitution, fornication, and possibly also incest, all extremely insolently, and sometimes even with Christian women.” Nor did the judge balk at forcing a young Christian woman to “confess” that she had been sexually abused by the court Jew. “Instead of drawing conclusions from evidence,” Mintzker surmises apropos Jäger’s *modus operandi*, “he was drawing ‘facts’ from a predetermined conclusion.”

**OPPENHEIMER PLEADED** innocent to all the charges and attested to be, according to court transcripts, “a Jew by birth [with] the religion of an honest man” whose job was “to negotiate with powerful men and to handle them.” His dealings on behalf of the duke had made for a lucrative career but Oppenheimer remained tightlipped about the nature, extent and source of his wealth even under repeated questioning. He was similarly cagey about his relationships with women. He was sentenced to death just the same.

Jäger’s vituperative denunciation of Oppenheimer in his “summary of Süß’s treacherous machinations,” as he put it, helped turn a talented but luckless Jew into a paragon of evil in German folklore. A mainstay of antisemitism has always been a tendency to ascribe the sins, real or imagined, of a single Jew to all Jews everywhere and at all times. And so the alleged crimes of the fallen court Jew would come to be portrayed as the fruits of Jews’ inherent moral failings and biological traits.

Yet that’s probably not what the judge himself intended, Mintzker postulates. “Jäger’s Jew Süß is no Christ-killer or host desecrator,” he notes. “He is rather a libertine, a foreigner and the good administrator’s worst nightmare. He ‘sucked the money out of the prince, the country and the people,’ rather than sucking the blood of defenseless Christian children.” It’s not immediately obvious why Jäger’s labels should be seen as preferable to the old ritual murderer and Christ-kill-

er libels, but the point is taken: the judge took issue not so much with Oppenheimer’s religious beliefs as with his courtly intrigues.

We’ll never really know what Oppenheimer himself thought of his persecution and the reasons behind it. No first-person accounts by him survive. The closest we can come to adjudging his state of mind in the final days is through the self-aggrandizing reports of one Christoph David Bernard, who penned them for the benefit of the inquisition committee. A cantankerous fellow who converted from Judaism to Christianity and hailed from Lemberg (today Lviv in Ukraine), Bernard taught Hebrew at the University of Tübingen, distilled schnapps in his kitchen to supplement his income, and moonlighted as an anti-Jewish polemicist. During Oppenheimer’s trial, Bernard was tasked with translating the condemned man’s correspondence in Hebrew and Yiddish into German and he paid Oppenheimer several visits in his cell.

Bernard claimed to have been a rabbi once, and he was fairly well versed in *pilpul*, a form of rabbinical disputation. He tried showing Oppenheimer “the absurdity of the Talmud and all other rabbinical literature” to convince the Jewish prisoner to repent, convert and die as a Christian in the hope of a heavenly reward. Oppenheimer was emaciated, distraught and clutching at straws in the hope of an earthly reprieve, yet he would have none of it. He hadn’t been particularly devout before but now in adversity he embraced his Judaism. His resolve earned him only scorn and ridicule from Bernard – despite the lecturer’s admission that “he always behaved toward me in a friendly and pleasant way.” Oppenheimer even decided to include Bernard in his will.

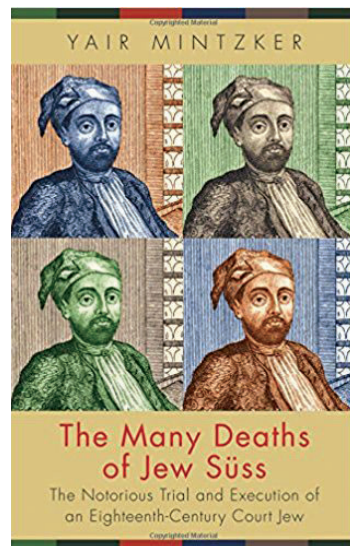
Mordechai Schloss, who is Mintzker’s third witness, saw Oppenheimer in a different light. Schloss, too, was a prominent court Jew who grew up in the storied “Jews’ Alley” in Frankfurt’s historic ghetto before rising to prominence in Württemberg’s princely courts. Whereas Bernard, a self-styled “proselyte,” portrayed the Jewish prisoner as a pathetic creature who refused to see the light about the one true faith, Schloss viewed Oppenheimer as a “martyr” who sanctified God’s name (*kiddush Hashem*) with his refusal to abandon his spiritual patrimony. But that was only after Schloss himself had testified against Oppenheimer, branding him a perfidious wheeler-dealer. He did it to save

his own skin, most likely.

Shortly after Oppenheimer’s execution, Schloss published “The Story of the Passing of Joseph Süß,” a brief pamphlet in Yiddish that sought to rehabilitate the dead man’s image by depicting him as a “saintly righteous man” who had come to see the errors of his ways. Oppenheimer went to his death by reciting the *Shema*, the text’s anonymous author reported. “[T]he world,” he added, “has not seen such a righteous man as Süß for a very long time.”

Through its stylized vocabulary, Mintzker speculates, the pamphlet offered Joseph Oppenheimer up as a latter-day incarnation of his famous biblical namesake who, in Pharaoh’s service, was history’s first court Jew. Just as Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery in Egypt, so Oppenheimer forgave his Jewish brethren like Schloss for betraying him. If Mintzker is correct, it was a sort of posthumous *mea culpa* by fair-weather friends.

Oppenheimer has been followed by a long line of moneyed Jewish bogeymen, from the Rothschilds to George Soros, whose unrelenting demonization has likewise served to vilify Jews. He has never been allowed to rest in peace. ■



**The Many Deaths of Jew Süß:  
The Notorious Trial and Execution  
of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew**  
Yair Mintzker  
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344 pages; \$24.23