

WEEKEND

Victims of history

A German historical institute acknowledges its own dark history with an online exhibition honoring the memory of seven Jewish medievalists who were expelled from its ranks during the time of the Third Reich



MGH founder Baron Heinrich Friedrich Karl Freiherr vom Stein.

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On April 16, 1939, Prof. Wilhelm Levison and his wife, Elsa, secretly fled their home in the western German town of Bonn. Levison, who was in his early 60s, was already a world-renowned medieval historian. Following the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, in 1935, Levison had been forced to resign from his job at the University of Bonn. But, unwilling to acknowledge the new reality emerging around him, he did not leave Germany, despite the pleas of his brother, who lived in Britain.

He suffered another blow in 1938 with the adoption of laws prohibiting Jews from visiting public libraries. Even then

Levison did not give up easily. He continued with his research work from home in Bonn, while his students, who remained faithful to their beloved teacher, read and summarized for him the books and articles he did not have direct access to himself. Eventually, though, Levison surrendered to his bleak fate and left his homeland. He spent the rest of his life as a visiting professor at the University of Durham, to which he was invited by colleagues, continuing his research there until his death in 1947, at age 70. A year after his death, his groundbreaking book "England and the Continent in the Eighth Century" was published, and was framed by its author as a gesture of gratitude toward his British hosts. It is still considered a milestone in the modern historiography of the early medieval West.

Levison, however, did not forget his homeland, and in the preface to his book he praised the students and colleagues who had not abandoned him during difficult times. Upon his death he bequeathed his sizeable collection of books, which he had managed to smuggle out of Nazi Germany, to the University of Bonn Library, which had suffered significant losses during the war.

Wilhelm Levison is one of seven Jewish medievalists commemorated in a recently launched online exhibition in Germany. The exhibition showcases the stories of Philipp Jaffé (1819-1870), who committed suicide following an antisemitically motivated academic dispute; Harry Bresslau (1848-1926), who was denied tenure as result of being Jewish; Henry Simonsfeld (1852-1913), whose academic career was blocked because of his Jewish heritage; Ludwig Traube (1861-1907), who had a torturous time finding an academic position because of his ancestry; Ernst Perels (1882-1945), forced to resign his position at the University of Berlin only later to perish in Flossenburg concentration camp; and Erika Sinauer (1896-c. 1942), the sole woman commemorated in the exhibition, who was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

All seven were employed as research fellows at the prestigious Monumenta Germaniae Historica research institute, which was established in 1819 with the aim of editing and publishing primary sources dealing with German history. The establishment of the MGH, with the support and encouragement of the Prussian statesman and reformer Baron Heinrich Friedrich Karl Freiherr vom Stein, was part of the wave of nationalism and Romanticism that swept over Europe in the late-18th and early-19th centuries. It is not by chance that the founders of the MGH chose the motto "Holy love of the fatherland gives the spirit" (*sanctus amor patriae dat animum*), which sums up the intellectual mood of the period. The initiative soon became the most important historical research enterprise in Germany, and was imitated in England, France and Italy.

In 1935 the Nazis seized the MGH and changed its name to the National Institute of Ancient German History. The Jewish scholars, who had been employed in the editing of texts and

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VICTIMS

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were among the pillars of research at the MGH, were initially permitted to continue their work, but their ability to function was gradually curtailed, and they were forced to retire one by one. The MGH in its new form became another tool in the well-oiled propaganda machine of the Nazi Party. Competing for control of the institution were the philologist Karl August Eckhardt, who was backed by SS head Heinrich Himmler, and Wilhelm Engel, who had the support of historian Walter Frank, the director of the National Institute for the History of the New Germany and a confidant of Nazi Party's chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. Frank got the upper hand, and under Engel's leadership, Nazi ideology and rhetoric dominated the institute's publications. All contact with Jewish scholars was forbidden and their earlier contributions to the editing enterprise were

concealed, and in some cases completely erased. In 1945, with the end of the war, the MGH returned to its prior research format and continues to exist today as one of the world's most important institutions for the study of medieval history, literature and culture.

Judaism did not play a major role in the personal or intellectual lives of any of the seven scholars commemorated in the new exhibition. Philippe Jaffé, Henry Simonsfeld and Ernst Perls had even converted, hoping it would help them with employment or in integrating and assimilating into German society. And yet, for all seven, Judaism was a present absence in their daily lives, and especially in the attitude of German society toward them, even before the rise to power of the Third Reich. The burgeoning antisemitism did not spare even those who sought to renounce their Judaism – and we know all too well how it all ended.

The exhibition "Between Patriotism and Exclusion: Jewish Scholars at the MGH" reviews the biographies of seven exceptional researchers, accompanied by dozens of fascinating documents re-

lated to their lives, work and contribution to MGH. Its timing is not accidental. Last year, Germany marked 1,700 years of Jewish settlement in Germany. Why 1700 years? On December 11, 321, Roman Emperor Constantine the Great issued a decree stating that Jews could, and should, fulfill their public duties in the city council of Colonia Agrippinensium (modern-day Cologne). This is the first certain evidence of Jewish settle-

ment on German soil. Dozens of exhibitions, films, musicals and performances dealing with Jewish life in Germany past and present were produced last year as part of an effort to reveal and advance the study of Jews' contribution to German society and culture.

More than a decade ago, during a visit to the MGH library, in Munich, I paged through a book whose cover had been stamped with a Nazi seal. When I pointed to the symbol and gave an inquiring look to Rudolf Schieffer, the institute's director at the time, who was sitting next to me, he said, "This is our history! We must come to terms with it. Not erase it." Since the end of World War II, Germany has invested a great deal of effort in coming to terms with its past. The fascinating online exhibition is but one example of that, and it deserves all manner of praise and respect.

The exhibition website: <https://visit.mgh.de/en/jew-em>

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