

Věra Leininger. *Auszug aus dem Ghetto: Rechtsstellung und Emanzipationsbemühungen der Juden in Prag in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts.* Singapore: Kuda Api Press, 2006. 429 + xlix pp. Maps, tables. EUR 39.95, paper, ISBN 978-981-05-6955-6.

Reviewed by Mathias Berek

Published on H-German (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

Vera Leininger tries to explain in her book why most of the Jewish inhabitants of Prague's *Judenstadt* (Jewish quarter) had left that district by the end of the nineteenth century. As she states: "In the nineteenth century, also the self-proclaimed adepts of the *Judenstadt* took part in the mystification of the Ghetto walls; already the 'tourists' of that time were crazy about the bizarre design and the infamous 'dangerousness' of the narrow district. Jewish contemporaries that lived there were obviously less taken with their neighborhood because they tried to escape from the cramped alleys, poor sanitary circumstances and not least the bad reputation of the 'Ghetto' as a quarter" (pp. 172-173). Her objective is to shed light on the complex and difficult situation Bohemian Jews found themselves in while struggling for emancipation--that is, caught between tight restraints set by imperial law, envy and hate by Christians, and the arbitrariness of the different levels of bureaucracy.

The book lays its focus on the everyday struggle of Prague's Jews for social and legal "Verbesserung" (advancement) in the first half of the nineteenth century, and wants to answer three basic questions: What was the legal position of the Jews of Prague after the "Systempatent" of 1797? What impact did those legal guidelines

have on their everyday life? And, what actual improvements were the Jews of Prague reaching for (pp. 4-5)? Leininger stresses that the "social-economical" sector was the most important one for the Jews of Prague as well as for her investigation. Analyzing that sector could provide insight into the ambivalent relationship between Jews and their environment: "between competition and partnership, buyer and seller, employer and employee, landlord and tenant, or between neighbors" (p. 5).

Leininger's main method is to compare the imperial laws with the reality of the Jews of Prague, thus describing the dynamic relations between authorities, Christians, and Jews. Her sources for this enterprise are mostly texts of laws and files of public authorities, complemented by address-, hand-, and trade books, calendars, biographical sketches, memoirs, necrologies, fiction, journals, and papers.

In the beginning, the author helpfully supplies readers not only with a brief discussion of some relevant contemporary terms, but also with a description of the main public authorities involved. Regarding the situation in the Habsburg Empire of that time this makes perfect sense. From the emperor down to the magistrate of Prague, a complex variety of institutions were

shaping the situation of the Jews—with magistrate and *Stadthauptmannschaft* of Prague (the local authorities), the Bohemian *Landesgubernium* (the regional authority of Bohemia), and the Vienna *Hofkanzlei* (court chancellery) being the most crucial. Within this jungle of organizations and their various interests, laws were difficult to implement on the local level, and in the other direction appeals of citizens against actions of the authorities normally triggered extensive processes that sometimes lasted years.

The first part of the book covers the legal situation of the Jews in Bohemia in the first half of the nineteenth century regarding population, education, possession of realties, and earning possibilities. It gives a detailed description of how much their everyday life was determined by strict discrimination. Despite "Toleranzpatent" and "Systemalpatent," there still were many special regulations for the Jewish population of the empire. The number of Jews allowed to live in Austria-Hungary was limited, many requirements had to be met in order to marry, there was a special marriage tax for Jews, marriages between Jews and Christians were forbidden, Jews were not allowed to settle freely in the country, there was only a restricted set of names Jews were allowed to bear, and they were forbidden to buy "Christian property." These regulations led to a situation whereby, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, even the strict quota for the number of legally settled Jews in Bohemia was not reached. The introduction of the *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*, the Austrian codification of civil law, in 1812, did not change much for the Jews, since the other restraining laws were still effective.

The second part of the book is devoted to the Jews of Prague and their struggle for emancipation. Sub-chapters describe the history of the Jewish district and the Jewish market, the petitions to the monarch by Jewish inhabitants of Prague, the proceedings concerning Jewish possession of "Christian realties," the confrontations against

Jews by Christian craftsmen, traders, and other citizens, and the revolutionary years of 1848/49 with their consequences for the Jewish population. Here, the book impressively shows how restricted the life of the Jews was, how arbitrary the decisions of the authorities were, and what huge amounts of evidence Jews had to provide in order to reach very small measures of emancipation, such as being allowed to live in some parts outside the ghetto, in the "Christenstadt" (Christians' part of the city). The *Judenstadt* was located near the river Moldau, and was unhealthily damp, narrow, and lacking canalization. Moreover given the special laws for Jews and its congestion, the ghetto had no room for larger businesses or even fabrics. So, Jews from all strata tried to move out, although the majority of them were forbidden to settle in other parts of the city. Rich in detailed analysis, Leininger describes a vast number of examples where Jews were denounced because they lived or had their (work)shops within the Christian districts of the old city. This always led to a lengthy process of reports being written, commissions established, decisions made, evictions scheduled, and appeals against those decisions filed to the higher authorities. In many cases, Jews were forced to return to the *Judenstadt* or to leave Prague, but in many others authorities either decided in favor of the Jews or just put up with the situation. The main reason for a Jew to be officially allowed to live outside the ghetto, or to possess "Christian" real estate, was always his economic usefulness (and it was generally men involved in this process) to the city or the state: How much he paid in taxes, how many (Christian) workers he employed, whether he held patents, or had installed new machinery in his factory.

Leininger's conclusion to her detailed study is as ambiguous as the situation of Prague's Jews: They were clearly discriminated against by law in comparison to other population groups, the inconsistency of the manifold laws gave lower authorities unlimited room for further discrimination, and the Jews' legal status was additionally con-

strained by traditional privileges within the city. The few privileged Jews often had to claim their rights against local authorities, who exceeded their competencies not only against, but also in favor of the Jews, depending on their own profit. Generally, the Jewish appeals and petitions of the 1830s and 1840s show that the most crucial goal for Jews from all social strata was to gain civic equality regarding social and economic freedom. The reaction of the monarch to the many Jewish pleas for individual or general civic rights was to bestow medals and titles of nobility on some particularly deserving Jews—but in reality they as well as all non-privileged Jews had to use legal, illegal and extralegal ways to circumnavigate restrictions and to survive economically. Finally, the Jewish migration spurred by economic needs of the city ended the geographical restrictions on Jews, no matter how fierce the harassment was. Thus, the restrictive rules applied to Jews on the basis of "outdated legal foundations" (p. 427) were de facto no longer imposed. It was a long process that saw many setbacks until 1867, when Jews in the Habsburg Empire finally gained legal equality—a process wherein the Jews of Prague played an important role. Most of their success occurred less because they influenced legislation, but rather because the majority of them pushed their claims in everyday life and insisted on protecting advances that had already been achieved.

Particularly intriguing is the chapter about how the revolution of 1848 not only brought short-term civic equality, but also unleashed hordes of anti-Semites attacking Jews and their property. The latter, combined with the outbreak of a Czech nationalism that tended to identify Jews as German, excluded those Jews from reforms. This situation led to a major wave of Jewish emigration to the United States.

But as interesting the book is for its insight into the everyday world of Prague's Jews in that period it still has some flaws. First, Leininger keeps out of the recent discussion whether the

Jews in nineteenth-century central Europe can be regarded as assimilating into, acculturating to, interculturating, or co-constituting their societies.[1] Instead, even though not explicitly, she seems to stick to a segregationist interpretation that sees Jewry as a mostly alien minority without any influence on the culture of their society. Second, the whole work is not very consistently structured. Some topics, like the extension of the *Judenstadt*, are repeated in several chapters. Even within the conclusion, concluding sentences are merely scattered. And throughout parts of the book, the description of examples seems to substitute for a line of argument—with the effect that the reader sometimes loses track of the book's aim. Third, what makes the reading even harder is that the author often adopts the juristic language of contemporary documents, without explaining the terms (like "Mautgefälle," an outdated word for tax revenues). Additionally, the book is full of grammar and spelling errors—to an extent that sometimes gets in the way of understanding.

Nevertheless, Leininger's book provides deep insight into the everyday consequences of the various stages of discrimination against Jews in an era of incipient economic emancipation and the transformation of Jew-hatred into anti-Semitism. It provides a great deal of evidence for this, and thus contributes a great deal to the Jewish history of Bohemia.

Note

[1]. Steven E. Aschheim, "German History and German Jewry: Boundaries, Junctions and Interdependence," *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute* 43 (1998): 315–322; Shulamit Volkov, "Die Erfindung einer Tradition. Zur Entstehung des modernen Judentums in Deutschland," *Historische Zeitschrift* 253 (1991): 609–628; Till van Rahden, *Jews and Other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity, and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860–1925*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Stefanie Schüler-Springo-

rum, *Die jüdische Minderheit in Königsberg, Preußen, 1871–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996); and Klaus Hödl, "Jenseits des Nationalen--Ein Bekenntnis zur Interkulturation. Einleitung zum Themenheft," *transversal. Zeitschrift für jüdische Studien*, Sonderheft "Jenseits des Nationalen" 5, no. 1 (2004): 3-17.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Mathias Berek. Review of Leininger, Věra. *Auszug aus dem Ghetto: Rechtsstellung und Emanzipationsbemühungen der Juden in Prag in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26221>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.