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The Baron, the Jews, and the Nazis: Journey into a Family History

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SYNOPSIS

When the Berlin Wall fell in winter 1989/90 I promised my mother that I would accompany her to the places in the GDR where she spent her childhood. Prior to that I had not been allowed to travel to the GDR and was under surveillance by the Ministry of State Security (Stasi). As it was, I soon regretted my promise, because those places in Prussia, Pomerania, Saxony and Thuringia were feudal castles and manors where my aristocratic forebears had held sway, partly since the 12th century, before being forced to flee to the West in 1945.

Archive materials indicate that my relatives had cultivated a racist anti-Semitism as early as the 19th century, long before the emergence of the NSDAP. The German aristocracy, with its hatred of the Jews and its elitist mania for pure breeding, was an early source of NS ideology and the Nuremberg "racial laws."

My great-great grandmother, Gertrud Elisabeth Freiin von Raven-Beust (1850-1936), was the Lady of Langenorla Castle, near Weimar, and of Groß Luckow in the Uckermark. Even as a child she reviled dark-haired children as "murderers of Christ". For the adult baroness, Jews were also "of a foreign race" and a threat to the "pure noble German blood". Jews were forced to leave her grounds if they remained there more than 12 hours.

Just how aggressively anti-Semitic aristocratic women were is usually underestimated. My aunts and (great-)grandmothers revived and further disseminated their hatred of Jews while staying at spas or seaside resorts. Their spouses occasionally even beat up Jewish guests at a spa after attending lectures on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the supposed "global financial power of the Jews". Their everyday language was interspersed with murder fantasies about the Jews. For example, in the 1920s, when she was short of money, my great-aunt Hertha von Schierstädt, wife of a Wehrmacht officer, wrote to her mother: "What I would like to do most of all today is to strike a Jew dead and come and collect you!"

Usually the private archives of aristocratic family groups are closed to scholars. The lucky chance of my ancestry gained me access to them, and I found a wealth of letters, diaries, documents and photographs. I also did systematic research in federal, state and military archives. In the end, I was openly confronted with the attitude of my many aristocratic relatives to Jews: by "relatives" I mean one to two dozen aristocratic families, making up about 100 persons. These are typical in every respect of the German aristocracy. Germany has about 82 million inhabitants; almost 60,000 of them are from

“aristocratic families”. Given that for centuries German aristocrats only married among themselves, it is rare that one “aristocrat” is not related to another.

The findings of my research exceeded my worst nightmares: among the hundreds of relatives, I discovered just one who did not revile Jews and Social Democrats. In the eyes of the aristocrats, the Jews were responsible for just about everything: the antiquated agrarian practices of big 19th century landowners; the defeat in the First World War, the demise of the monarchy (1918), the loss of great privileges, each and every economic crisis, and the establishment of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), the first fragile German democracy.

What was behind all this? The most important source of this hatred of Jews was the centuries-old Christian Anti-Judaism. This attained new heights in the early 19th century due to German Romanticism, a counter-movement to the Enlightenment and Emancipation.

In 1811, the Romantic poet Achim von Arnim (1781-1831) founded a first elitist club in Berlin, the “Deutsche Tischgesellschaft”, as an angry response to the imminent Prussian Edict of 1812, concerning the civil status of the Jews in the Prussian state and intended to grant the Jews very limited rights. That club was the reactionary and nationalist counterpart to the enlightened salons hosted by the Jewish salonieres Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin Varnhagen.

Among the members of the Tischgesellschaft were some of the most influential representatives of the Kingdom of Prussia: princes, ministers of state, generals, university directors, intellectuals, artists. The majority of its members were aristocratic. Women were excluded. Under no circumstances could Jews become members, even if they had been baptized. It was Achim von Arnim who proposed subjecting Jewish people to painful chemical experiments and reconstructing them out of filth so as to prove that they were not human beings.

One generation later, in 1847, when King Friedrich Wilhelm IV convened the First United Landtag (state parliament) in Prussia, aristocrats constituted the majority of the members. That state assembly debated the question of the Jews; among the speakers I found the names of many of my relatives, also some with my mother’s maiden name: von Raven (the city of Ravensbrück got its name from that family). All kinds of variants of the aristocratic hatred of Jews emerged in the Landtag. One of the most aggressive was expressed by the then 32-year-old Otto von Bismarck, who would later become the German Imperial Chancellor.

The Lemmie manor near Hanover belongs to the von Ditfurths. Many of my relatives headed there when escaping to West Germany from the Red Army in 1945. In the 1950s, I spent my holidays there as a child and heard my fill of mythos and legends about the aristocracy. At the time, Wilhelm Stuckart was recuperating there – Hitler’s “indispensable lawyer”, State Secretary of the Interior, co-responsible for the Nuremberg Racial Laws and participant in the Wannsee Conference in 1942 on the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.”

In the 1920s, the lord of the Lemmie manor, Major General Wilhelm von Ditfurth, my great-grandfather and Hitler's officer, belonged to the nationalistic (völkische) fraction. He was a friend of Paul von Hindenburg's, and his circle included many fascist aristocrats, like Hans von Papen and General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. Ditfurth later became commander of several prisoner-of-war camps.

Windischleuba Castle in Saxony was the ancestral seat of my great-great uncle, Börries Freiherr von Münchhausen (1874-1945). I had been told as a child that he was a great friend of the Jews. The fact is that in 1900, Münchhausen, together with the Jewish artist Ephraim Moses Lilien, had published the book *Juda*, which received enthusiastic reviews by Martin Buber and Theodor Herzl. Münchhausen was not the only aristocrat interested in the Zionist Jews around the turn of the century. In 1898 Emperor Wilhelm II met Theodor Herzl three times in Palestine for negotiations on a Zionist state.

During my research activities, however, I found a letter which Münchhausen wrote to the Nazi leaders in 1936. In it he suggested that the Jews have their "German cover names" taken away from them; many aristocrats agreed with him. His Nazi friends were delighted. There were, however, practical problems, as a result of which Jewish Germans were finally forced to adopt the first names Sara and Israel.

How did a supposed friend of the Jews become a fervent anti-Semite? What happened among German aristocrats between 1900 and 1933? When and why did the majority of German aristocrats become anti-Semitic? My book deals with these questions.

In 1914 Münchhausen went to war with enthusiasm. In 1916 Field Marshall General Paul von Hindenburg, who carried Münchhausen's poems around with him on the battle field, appointed the poet-baron to the Military Section of the German Foreign Office (MMA). Münchhausen became a war propagandist at the fronts in Poland, Russia, Greece and France. His books were widely circulated. Politically, he courted the nationalist and imperialist *Alldeutschen* (Pan-Germans), who were demanding more "Lebensraum" for the Germans.

The defeat in the war, the November revolution, and the end of the monarchy in 1918 meant a decisive loss of great social and material privileges for the aristocracy. One typical claim was that the "international Jews" had robbed the German people of "honor and defense" with the help of the Social Democrats.

After the First World War, Münchhausen became a "racial ideologist" and was the responsible editor of the racist newspaper *Volk und Rasse*. In 1925, the *Deutsche Adelsblatt*, the major journal for German aristocrats, published his key text "Adel und Rasse," which states that the significance of the aristocracy is "to breed people"; the "aristocracy's purity of breeding" is the "most important issue" for the German people, and just one drop of "Jewish blood" is enough to "bastardize" a whole Germanic clan.

Münchhausen was speaking for the majority of aristocrats. At the meetings of the association of German aristocrats known as the "Deutsche Adelsgenossenschaft" (DAG) and in the *Deutsche Adelsblatt* his peers demanded that "hatred of the Jews" be "freed of all moral scruples." All aristocratic families that had a Jewish woman anywhere in their family tree were to be excluded from the association and stigmatized. The favorite

register of the aristocracy, called the Gotha, was now joined by the EDDA (Eiserne Buch Deutschen Adels deutscher Art). This was a register of “pure blooded” aristocrats from 1925 to 1942, listing only German “aristocrats” who had neither Jewish nor dark-skinned nor African ancestors *before* 1750. With this expectation of “pure breeding” the aristocracy even surpassed the demands of the SS.

One of the biggest projects undertaken by the poet and big landowner Börries von Münchhausen was to “cleanse” the Prussian Academy of the Arts in Berlin of Jewish and Republican artists. He became the self-declared enemy of Thomas Mann and Heinrich Mann, Alfred Döblin, Max Liebermann, Käthe Kollwitz, Else Lasker-Schüler and many others. Münchhausen organized the nationalist, anti-Semitic fraction in the world of German literature. This included, for example, Agnes Miegel, Lulu Strauß von Torney, Hans Grimm and many more. The Wartburg in Thuringia (where Martin Luther hid from the Pope in 1521) became Münchhausen’s strategic headquarters in his struggle against the “Judaization” of German literature.

He was on friendly terms with almost all the influential Nazi leaders, be that Josef Goebbels (Reich Propaganda Minister), Baldur von Schirach (Reich Youth Leader) or Wilhelm Fricke (Reich Interior Minister) – all of whom loved his poems. Münchhausen was closely associated with Reich Chancellor Franz von Papen and his Cabinet of Barons (1932). After the 1933 elections, Münchhausen associated with Joseph Goebbels, enthusing that, “Goebbels is simply a magical talker.” There were sometimes differences of opinion, however: Münchhausen wanted a small exclusive elite of German poets, while Goebbels strove for obligatory membership by all “Arian” writers in the new Reich Chamber of Literature (RSK). Münchhausen complied.

Sales of his works rose. The Hitler Youth travelled the country singing Münchhausen’s ballads. Münchhausen rid his works of all the Jews he had ever mentioned. Should anyone reproach him with being “friendly to Jews” because of his book *Juda*, Goebbels would protect him.

In 1937 Münchhausen angrily defended the Nazi system against emigrants like Thomas Mann, to whom he wrote: “Never before in any country and at any other time has a government granted a people such an abundance of blessings in such a short space of time and under such difficult circumstances as Hitlerism has granted Germans since coming to power.”

During the war, the 66-year-old Münchhausen held 65 lectures in 1940. In 1944 he was included on Hitler’s list of “divinely gifted people” (the “Führer’s List”), the country’s most important writers, in the eyes of the regime. The most influential circles among the aristocracy had long since realized, however, that Nazi Germany would lose the war. Many of them distanced themselves from the Nazi state they had helped to consolidate and for which they had destroyed the Weimar Republic. A random sample of 312 aristocratic families showed that 3,592 members of those families had been members of the NSDAP, about a quarter of them before 1933. Aristocrats were also members of the SS. Indeed, there was no shortage of princes in the NSDAP and the SS.

Now the aristocrats feared losing their property and their social status. This was a prime motivation for some of the would-be assassins around Claus Schenk Graf von

Stauffenberg, whose attack on Hitler on 20 July 1944 failed. The aristocracy had tried to gain a better negotiating position with the Allies.

I grew up with the fairy tale that the German aristocracy had been “against Hitler”. But all my relatives – except for one, who was therefore stigmatized and scorned by the family – despised the Jews and worked to create the “Thousand Year Reich”.

In 1945, as the US Army was approaching Windischleuba Castle, Börries Freiherr von Münchhausen shot himself.

But that is no by no means the end of the story. When the Saxon town of Kohren-Sahlis – where Münchhausen used to own the Sahlis Manor – decided to celebrate the life of my great-great uncle on the occasion of its jubilee in 2003, I requested that they desist from honoring the Anti-Semite. However, the Lord Mayor, the Town Council (including descendents of Münchhausen’s) and local historians opposed me. I was publicly insulted as someone who “fouls their own nest”.

The message was understood. One year later, Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, leader of the meantime prohibited Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann (WSG, Paramilitary Sports Group) and one of the most brutal and most famous German Nazis, purchased the former Sahlis manor. Members of Hoffmann’s WSG had been involved in several attacks. The Jewish publisher Shlomo Levin, former chairman of the Israelite Cultural Community in Nuremberg, and his partner Frieda Poeschke were murdered in Erlangen in December 1980. The weapon belonged to Hoffmann. At least one member of Hoffmann’s Group was responsible for the attack on the October Fest in Munich in 1980, when 13 people were killed and 211 injured, some of them seriously.

In 1980, the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann was finally prohibited. Hoffmann spent quite a number of years in prison. Then, in 2004, local politicians welcomed him as the new owner of the Münchhausen manor. The Saxon government gave Hoffmann a grant of 111,942,12 Euros to renovate the building.

As if that were not enough, Windischleuba Castle is today a youth hostel located just a few kilometers from the Sahlis manor. In 2008, Nazis gathered there to listen to speeches by Hitler and Goebbels; one of them held a speech in praise of Börries Freiherr von Münchhausen.

To this very day, aristocratic families set themselves above civil laws. For example, they have their own internal statutes, inheritance regulations and education methods, by means of which their children are persuaded to marry someone of “pure breeding”, that is to say, no Jews, “niggers” or Muslims.

Throughout its history, the aristocracy has been very successful at exhibiting only those facets that are useful to them when it comes to being part of the ruling elite in the respective society and to concealing their true character: that of a caste who believe they are superior to others due to their breeding and tradition. Today, the aristocracy hides behind the myth of 20 July 1944, and pretends to have rejected and despised the Nazis. This book refutes such claims, disproves other fairy tales about aristocrats, and describes what the relationship between the aristocracy and the Jews was really like.