

Introduction

My business is to record what people say; but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole.

—Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.152.3

Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, better known as Jew Süß, is one of the most iconic figures in the history of anti-Semitism. Originally from the Jewish community in Heidelberg, in 1733 Oppenheimer became the court Jew (personal banker and advisor) of the duke of the small German state of Württemberg. When the duke died unexpectedly in 1737, the Württemberg authorities arrested Oppenheimer, put him on trial, and finally executed him for what they termed Oppenheimer's "damnable maltreatments of prince and country."¹ Extremely well known in other parts of the world, in the United States Oppenheimer is remembered today mainly through a vicious Nazi propaganda movie made about him in 1940 (figure 3).

Though he was executed nearly three hundred years ago, Oppenheimer's trial never quite ended. Even as his trial was unfolding, it was already clear that what was being placed in the scales of justice was not any of Oppenheimer's supposed crimes. Indeed, the vague verdict pronounced in his case conspicuously failed to

provide any specific details about the reasons for the death sentence. The significance of his trial, and the reasons for Oppenheimer's public notoriety ever since the eighteenth century, is to be found not in the dry language of legal treatises but in the role his story has played as a parable about the rise and fall of prominent Jews in Christian Europe. Oppenheimer's meteoric ascendance during the years he spent in Württemberg and his no less spectacular fall have been viewed by many as an allegory for the history of German Jewry both in Oppenheimer's time as well as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here was a man who tried to fit in, and seemed to for a time, but was eventually rejected; a Jew who enjoyed much success but then fell from power and met a violent death. Thus, at every point in time when the status, culture, past, and future of Germany's Jews have hung in the balance, the story of this man has moved to center stage, where it was investigated, novelized, dramatized, and even set to music. It is no exaggeration to say that "Jew Süß" is to the German collective imagination what Shakespeare's Shylock is to the English-speaking world.

The historical figure of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer is incredibly elusive, and any understanding of him must begin with the political and legal regimes under which he lived and died. Oppenheimer spent almost his entire life in the southwest corner of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (see figures 1 and 2). In the eighteenth century, the Holy Roman Empire was the general political organization that connected the hundreds of more or less sovereign polities in German-speaking central Europe, including large states like Bavaria and Saxony, Imperial and free cities like Frankfurt am Main and Nuremberg, and even some Imperial monasteries and knightly territories. The Empire was not a nation-state in the modern sense of the term—it possessed

no central executive, no bureaucracy, and no standing army—but it did have some common features, such as a head (an emperor) and various representational bodies. Especially important for understanding Oppenheimer's case is the fact that the Empire's members shared a common legal system scholars term "inquisitorial."

An inquisitorial system is best contrasted with an adversarial one. In an adversarial criminal legal system, the court serves as a neutral referee between two principal adversaries: the prosecution and the defense. This is the system used today throughout the English-speaking world. In an inquisitorial system, on the other hand, judges are entrusted with actively investigating cases, rather than merely adjudicating between the two opposing sides. The inquisitorial system as such should not be conflated with the particular historical institutions of the Papal or Spanish Inquisitions, which are but two examples of a larger system. The judge-inquisitors in Oppenheimer's trial were not ecclesiastical officials entrusted with combatting heresy, but state servants who applied the inquisitorial procedures common in the Holy Roman Empire to Oppenheimer's particular case.

The specific corner of the Holy Roman Empire that Oppenheimer inhabited throughout his life was characterized by great political diversity. This part of central Europe contained important Imperial cities, many small territories belonging to Imperial knights and monasteries, and a series of small- and medium-size princely states that—as opposed to the Empire to which they all belonged—did have their own armies, executive organs, and state administrations. The political plurality in this part of the Empire was accompanied by considerable confessional diversity as well. German-speaking central Europe was the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation, the place where Martin Luther lived and

where his message developed and prospered after 1517. But during Oppenheimer's time, over two centuries after Luther's break with the Catholic Church, the spread of Protestantism in the Empire had largely ground to a halt. While some polities in the Empire's southwest had turned Protestant (Lutheran or Calvinist) over the years, others remained devoutly Catholic, and yet a third group of states accommodated more than one confession within their borders. The duchy of Württemberg, the site of Oppenheimer's trial and execution, is a case in point. After 1733, this overwhelmingly Lutheran duchy was ruled by a Catholic duke.

Court Jews like Oppenheimer were a common feature of the Empire's diverse landscape. The number of Jews in the Holy Roman Empire wasn't large, partly because many territories and towns prohibited Jews from settling within their borders. In other places, though, Jews came to play a vital economic role as moneylenders, financiers, and traders. Jews lent money to princes who encountered difficulties in raising funds directly from their subjects; they supplied state armies with necessary provisions and military articles; they helped in the minting of coins; and they traded in many commodities, including precious stones and other luxury items. Such activities brought Jews like Oppenheimer to the courts of many princes in the Holy Roman Empire, where the most favored habitués were known as "court Jews."²

We do not know much about Oppenheimer's early life except that he was born in Heidelberg, probably in 1697 or 1698, to a Jewish tax collector by the name of Issachar Süsskind Oppenheimer and his wife, Michal. Starting in the mid-1720s, the young Oppenheimer served as a court Jew to several German princes in the Empire's southwest, first in the Palatinate, then in Hesse-Darmstadt, and finally in Württemberg, a duchy whose future ruler, Carl Alexander, Oppenheimer had met and befriended in

1732. In October 1733, the Catholic Carl Alexander ascended to the Württemberg throne, and Oppenheimer began to enjoy much success. He was first the duke's special representative in Frankfurt am Main, then his court Jew in Stuttgart. In this latter capacity, he ran the local mint and was involved in managing many aspects of the state's finances. These years of close collaboration with the Catholic duke did not last long, though. Less than four years after becoming duke of Württemberg, Carl Alexander suffered a sudden and fatal stroke. Oppenheimer was arrested that same night. During the next eleven months, he was kept under guard, first in his home in Stuttgart and then in two different jails. A special inquisition committee was appointed to investigate his case. Oppenheimer was interrogated daily for almost four months, met with many different people in jail, and was finally led back to Stuttgart, where he awaited his verdict in a room overlooking the marketplace.

On Friday, January 31, 1738, Oppenheimer's death sentence was read to him in a special session of the criminal court convened for his case. The court did not specify the exact basis for its verdict,³ but the way it choreographed the subsequent execution clearly implied that Oppenheimer was guilty of corruption, the debasement of coins in the mint, and sexual transgressions.⁴ Four days later, after a final public meeting of the court, the executioner's men escorted their prisoner to a site just north of Stuttgart and dragged him up a forty-foot-long ladder onto a bright red gallows. Anywhere between ten and twenty thousand people came to view the spectacle. On that Tuesday morning, February 4, 1738, they watched as Oppenheimer was strangled to death and his body then locked in a gibbet specifically constructed for the occasion. The caged corpse was supposed to serve, in the words of the public verdict, "as a hideous example for others."⁵

The Historiographic Predicament

Many scholars of the early modern period might look with envy at the profusion of documents left by Oppenheimer's trial. Today, in over one hundred cardboard boxes in the state archives in Stuttgart, one can read close to thirty thousand handwritten pages of documents from the time period of the trial. Among these pages are the materials collected by the inquisition committee assigned to the case; protocols of the interrogations of Oppenheimer himself, his alleged accomplices, and many witnesses; records of the committee's deliberations; documentation relating to Oppenheimer's confiscated property; descriptions of Oppenheimer's conversations with visitors; and a great number of poems, pamphlets, and essays about Oppenheimer's final months, days, hours, and even minutes. The state archives in Stuttgart contain a whole universe of sources about Oppenheimer's case, an unparalleled opportunity—or at least so it seems at first glance—to write an extraordinarily detailed history of the last years in the life of the notorious “Jew Süß.”⁶

Yet while the abundance of sources about Oppenheimer's trial is remarkable, the sources themselves leave much to be desired. This is often the case with events that generate such an immense amount of discourse. As long as Oppenheimer was a nobody, there was little reason to falsify the basic facts about his life—hence both the scarcity and general reliability of sources about his early career.⁷ Once Oppenheimer became famous and powerful, however, and especially after his arrest and downfall, few had reason to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about his case. The inquisition committee assigned to the case lacked direct evidence against its Jewish prisoner, but wishing to make an example of him anyway, it left no stone unturned, no

person unquestioned, and no fact in its right place in pursuit of its purpose. The testimonies of Oppenheimer's alleged accomplices, who were trying to save their own skins, are at least as problematic. The visitors who were allowed into Oppenheimer's cell often tried to convert him to Christianity, but having failed in their endeavors, they created what in all probability are highly polemical accounts of their encounters with him. Last but not least, Joseph Süß Oppenheimer himself was fighting for his life and can hardly be considered a reliable witness where his own deeds and misdeeds are concerned. Historians of Oppenheimer's case have to face a curious predicament: they possess few documents about Oppenheimer's early career, but what they have is fairly reliable; they have a huge amount of material about Oppenheimer's activities in Stuttgart and the last months of his life, but almost all of it is extremely tendentious. Therein lies the crux of the predicament of any historian of Oppenheimer's case: less proves to be more, and more proves to be less.

What is true for modern historians also applies to Oppenheimer's own contemporaries. Consider, for instance, the case of Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon*, a massive reference work published between 1731 and 1754 that was probably the easiest way for contemporaries to find information about Oppenheimer. The entry about Oppenheimer fits nicely within the long series of biographical sketches for which this lexicon has been famous since the eighteenth century. "Süß Oppenheimer, (Joseph)," the entry begins,

was born in Frankfurt am Main, and saw the light of day in 1692. He was a descendant of one of the wealthiest and most honorable Jewish families in that place. Its origins can be traced back to the city of Oppenheim, hence its name, and

it enjoys great reputation among the Jews in Vienna and Prague. According to some sources, Oppenheimer was the bastard son of a Christian man. His Jewish mother, who had been known in times past for her great beauty, was still alive a few years ago, but his [Christian] father died when Oppenheimer was still a boy and replaced by a Jewish man, from whom he received his name and by whom he was raised. Most learned people, however, doubt the accuracy of this description.⁸

The first few sentences of this entry are worth quoting at length because they are representative of the inaccuracies one finds in many contemporary descriptions of Oppenheimer's life. Apart from the fact that Oppenheimer's birth date cannot be known with complete certainty (modern historians usually give dates in 1697 or 1698), it is clear that his birthplace was Heidelberg, not Frankfurt, and that his family was not a wealthy one. Indeed, over half the space in this entry's first paragraph is devoted to an anecdote whose accuracy, as the author himself is quick to admit, "[m]ost learned people . . . doubt."⁹

Doubt and uncertainty characterized contemporary stories about Oppenheimer not only for factual reasons. What, ultimately, was the meaning of the rise and fall of this man? How does it fit into the longer history of Jews and Christians in the Holy Roman Empire and beyond? Zedler's entry gives a fairly common description of Oppenheimer's life as a court Jew in Stuttgart and the duke's palace in nearby Ludwigsburg:

He shaved his beard, wore expensive clothes, maintained a well-stocked library, and had his own carriages and horses. He was present at all courtly events. He ate and drank whatever was laid before him except for pork, and he did not have

any objections to having affairs with Christian women—indeed, he took many Christian concubines, of all social classes, and led a libertine’s life. As for the duke: Oppenheimer could enter his chambers at all times and hours, and he bespoke his mind whenever he wished to do so. The entire fiscal business of the state went through him . . . and his power at court grew day by day.¹⁰

Such a description does not simply paint a vivid (albeit questionable) picture of Oppenheimer’s life at court. It also points to a tension in Oppenheimer’s life, often commented on by contemporaries, between following Jewish law (not eating pork) and discarding accepted norms (shaving his beard, having Christian concubines). Although it does so in a more nuanced way, the entry might also point to a common biblical interpretation of Oppenheimer’s story: “He ate and drank whatever was laid before him” is probably an echo of Isaiah 22:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:32. “If the dead are not raised,” writes Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians, “let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” Together with the reference to Oppenheimer’s libertinism, this biblical reference signals that the end of Oppenheimer’s story was foreshadowed earlier in his life. Indeed, other contemporary texts would follow biblical allusions more explicitly. Some compared Oppenheimer to Ahitophel, King David’s treacherous advisor; others viewed his story as akin to that of Haman the Agagite, King Ahasuerus’s evil advisor from the Book of Esther; and yet others saw similarities between Oppenheimer and Simon bar Kokhba, the leader of a failed Jewish rebellion against Rome in the second century C.E.¹¹ Contemporaries were not only interested in the facts of Oppenheimer’s story, about which, more often than not, their knowledge was sorely lacking. They were also very interested in what this

man's story could have meant, and here, as is often the case, there were as many interpretations as interpreters.

Finally, there is the question of Oppenheimer's own perspective. In many publications from the time period of the trial, contemporaries showed interest not only in the facts of the story and what it could mean but also in Oppenheimer's own reactions to what was happening around him and ultimately to him. These sources highlight the third reason for the inherent uncertainty in eighteenth-century depictions of Oppenheimer's case. Even if contemporaries had had access to all the facts about Oppenheimer's life (and they hadn't), and even if they had been able to agree on a single interpretation of his story (and they weren't), they still never would have been able to enter Oppenheimer's mind, access his innermost thoughts, feel his emotions and passions, view the world through his eyes. The legacy of the eighteenth-century uncertainty vis-à-vis Oppenheimer's story is consequently threefold: factual, interpretative, and psychological. Both contemporaries and later historians could never completely understand what Oppenheimer had actually done, what his story signified, and how Oppenheimer himself experienced his own rise, fall, and violent death.

Despite the suspect usefulness of the primary sources, Oppenheimer's story has fascinated many historians over the years, and for two main reasons. First, there is the sheer drama of the story: the fact that Oppenheimer was born a Jew, led a not altogether religious life, but decided to die as a Jew despite all attempts to convert him while in jail. 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 then there is the execution itself: the red gallows and the iron gibbet; the bound Oppen-

heimer led up to the gallows; the moment of asphyxiation; and the decomposing cadaver left in the gibbet for years as a grave example for others. What historian, faced with these materials, would not be tempted to tell the story despite its many uncertainties?

The fascination with Oppenheimer's story, as we have already noted, has a second source as well. In the centuries after Oppenheimer's public hanging, his story came to represent the contested topic of Jewish integration into Christian society in Germany. Oppenheimer was neither the first nor the last prominent Jew to rise to fame and fall from power in a predominantly Christian country. But because his story took place right on the verge of the modern period, it became one of the most important allegories for the story of German Jews in modern times. Most important in that respect was the Nazi propaganda movie made about Oppenheimer in 1940 by the German director Veit Harlan, a movie so vicious, inflammatory, and patently false that in the wake of World War II, its director was put on trial for the mere fact of having created it. All of this explains why historians, writers, artists, and the German-speaking public at large never lost interest in Oppenheimer's story: why his trial, despite the many ambiguities, contradictions, and outright lies its records contain, has continued to fascinate people up through the present day.

What Is a Historian to Do?

What is a historian to do in such case, when none of the available sources can be trusted? When they often prevaricate, falsify, and distort, incessantly contradict one another and at times even contradict themselves? What is a historian to do when his or her sources are written by unreliable witnesses and for dubious purposes, paying little attention to well-documented events at the same time that they often describe at length dialogues that could

never have taken place and events that probably never happened? When one of the historian's most basic tasks—to describe what happened—is impractical and probably impossible, what is a historian to do? Should he or she do anything at all?

Such is the predicament of any historian of Oppenheimer's case, and over the years, different scholars and writers have faced it in different ways. In the nineteenth and first two-thirds of the twentieth centuries, major treatments of the case included works by Manfred Zimmermann (1874), Curt Elwenspoek (1926), Selma Stern (1929), and Heinrich Schnee (1963).¹² To this list have been added more recently important books by Barbara Gerber (1990) and especially Hellmut Haasis (1998); edited volumes by Alexandra Przyrembel and Jörg Schönert (2006) and Gudrun Emberger and Robert Kretzschmar (2012); and a steady stream of essays in academic journals, encyclopedias, popular magazines, and newspapers.¹³ Last but by no means least are the incredibly influential works of fiction about Jew Süss, including, among many others, an important novella by Wilhelm Hauff (1827), a seminal novel by Lion Feuchtwanger (1925), films by Lothar Mendes and Veit Harlan (1934 and 1940, respectively), and, more recently, Detlev Glanert's opera (1999) and a play by Yehoshua Sobol and Dieter Wedel (2013).¹⁴ Leaving aside derivative works and the many books and essays that treat the historical Oppenheimer only in passing, one can detect in this large corpus four basic approaches to the historian's predicament vis-à-vis the sources. Each of them has its advantages, but each entails major disadvantages as well.

1. *When all of the sources lie, a historian should read them carefully and critically, compare them with each other and add new material, finally deducing from the analysis what really happened.* The best

example of a historian who professes to have followed this method is Hellmut Haasis, although one can, of course, also find similar attempts by earlier and later historians. The idea here is to use many testimonies in order to circumvent the limitations of any single document. Many sources are complete prevarications and others are only partly reliable. But a close and critical examination of a large number of documents could nonetheless lead to important conclusions about the events surrounding Oppenheimer's life, trial, and execution.

Certainly, part of the historian's job is to find out the truth about past events, and only the most skeptical of scholars would deny the historical existence of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer or the basic outlines of his life story. But although quite a few historians profess to have uncovered the one indivisible truth about this case, scholars regularly disagree about what that truth actually is. Thus, some historians see Oppenheimer as a conniving, greedy parvenu, unscrupulous in his relationships with women and in his treatment of the traditions of the duchy of Württemberg. Others disagree, viewing the famous court Jew as a victim of a conspiracy, a scapegoat sacrificed on the altar of intolerance. Disagreement also exists about the basic facts in the unfolding of the trial itself—what Oppenheimer said, how he looked, and what he did or did not do before and after his arrest—and of course about the meaning of the story within European, German, and Jewish history. Indeed, because of the extraordinary number of conflicting statements in the trial documents, there is hardly a narrative about Oppenheimer one could *not* support with some documentation. Finding out the truth in this case, though a noble endeavor, proves much harder in practice than in theory.

Empirical works on Oppenheimer have consequently left us with a mixed legacy. On the one hand, we have several remarkable

studies about Oppenheimer's life that have without a doubt greatly advanced our knowledge of his case. One cannot help admiring especially Haasis's exemplary archival work, the full scope of which only a researcher who has spent many years reading the same sources can fully appreciate. The weaknesses of such empirical studies are not insubstantial, though. These accounts tend to reduce the incredible complexity of the case to the question of Oppenheimer's guilt—a kind of retrial, if you will, that once and for all would settle the truth of the matter definitively; they often do not explain why they choose to give credence to some testimonies while dismissing or ignoring others; and they pretend to have direct access to the past, although, like any work of history, they are to a large extent artificial constructions. Is there a way, then, to describe Oppenheimer's trial without pretending to always know the whole truth about it? Can one tell a story about what happened to Jew Süss without simultaneously dismissing anything that seems to contradict the author's particular interpretation? And can one treat empirical evidence both seriously and profitably while at the same time acknowledging that any story, and certainly any story about Jew Süss, is bound to contain fictional elements?

2. *When confronted by conflicting accounts of an event, historians should choose to keep silent about it.* Selma Stern and, more recently, Gudrun Emberger have confronted the predicament at least in part in this way, although keeping silent about certain topics is of course a characteristic of practically any work of history.

In her remarkable 1929 study *Jud Süss*, Stern depicted Oppenheimer as one of the earliest modern, secularized Jews. She viewed the tragedy of his life as the result both of his failed at-

tempt to be accepted as a Jew in a Christian society and of the reformist economic measures he tried to introduce in Württemberg. Leaving the questions of Oppenheimer's modernity and his economic policies aside (they are both debatable), Stern's work was pathbreaking in many respects. She was the first historian to have full access to the documents in the state archives in Stuttgart and consequently also the first to discuss some of the case's central records. Being the serious historian that Stern was, however, she refused to tackle certain topics, even including the unfolding of Oppenheimer's very trial: the sources simply did not allow her to reach a definitive conclusion about many issues.

One can detect the same tendency in the work of Gudrun Emberger.¹⁵ Few, if any, modern historians have studied the sources about Oppenheimer's trial as carefully as Emberger has, but few have also published so little. Despite the major differences between her patient and meticulous scholarship and the work by some of the other scholars of Oppenheimer's case, Emberger also seems to share the belief that historians should strive above all to recover the historical nucleus of Oppenheimer's story. Other historians believed that they had managed to do so and published their findings; Emberger, knowing the sources better than anyone, has been less sure about this possibility, and never published her long-awaited biography of the famous court Jew.

Stern's work and Emberger's depth of knowledge and caution are admirable. But isn't a story as important as Oppenheimer's worth more than silence? Have Stern and especially Emberger perhaps been a bit too cautious due to their pursuit of absolute and unquestionable truth? Is there a way to tell the story of Oppenheimer's trial without saying too much about it, but also without saying too little?

3. *When all of the sources are unreliable, one should leave history aside and turn to fiction instead.* This, over the years, has been the most popular approach to the story of Jew Süss. The most important examples in this respect are Hauff's novella, Feuchtwanger's novel, and particularly Harlan's notorious Nazi propaganda film.

There are of course many problems with fictional descriptions of Jew Süss. Although it is often very difficult to know what did take place in Oppenheimer's case, it is sometimes very clear what did *not* happen. The works by Hauff, Feuchtwanger, and Harlan are a case in point: they depict events that are pure fiction, characters that never existed, and dialogues that are nothing but figments of their authors' imaginations. Furthermore, Hauff's novella is tainted by early nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, and Harlan's 1940 film was supported and financed by none other than Joseph Goebbels. Under such circumstances, historians naturally tend to fight against the fictional accounts of the case. They rightly believe that setting the record straight is an important part of their job.

Dismissing out of hand any fictional account of Oppenheimer's case comes nonetheless at a price. One could leave aside here the old argument about art's ability to reach a higher truth despite, or perhaps because of, its "lies." (This was Aristotle's famous point in the *Poetics*, for instance.) The rabid anti-Semitism of some of the fictional accounts of Oppenheimer's life stretches this argument too thin. A similar objection can perhaps be made about the oft-repeated observation that works of history are always the result of the historian's creative interpretation and emplotment and consequently always contain a grain of the fictional. This observation is valuable, if by now also somewhat banal. Far more important to a scholarly treatment of Oppenheimer's story is the exact chrono-

logical ordering of truth and fiction within it. Some of the foremost historians of Oppenheimer's case—Stern, Haasis, and Emberger come immediately to mind—have argued for a clear distinction between the historical nucleus of the story (which came first) and the fictional depictions of “Jew Süß” (which came later).¹⁶ As we shall see, there is reason to believe that this chronology is topsy-turvy. Oppenheimer's trial was the product of fictional stories as much as it was their cause; it was a case in which life imitated art before art began to imitate life.

4. *Finally, when a historian can't trust any of the available sources, he or she should concentrate on the history of the lies themselves. Such lies might tell us little about Oppenheimer himself, but when analyzed with the historian's tool kit, they do tell us a great deal about the society that produced them and how it did or did not change over time.* The fourth and most recent approach to Oppenheimer's story concentrates on the history of the stories about Oppenheimer, an approach that is known in German as *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (“history of reception”) and associated with reader-response theory in the field of English literary studies.¹⁷ Some works in this vein (Barbara Gerber's excellent book, for instance) concentrate on the flood of literature that appeared in the wake of Oppenheimer's execution, while others (Przyrembel and Schönert's edited volume, for example, and a recent book by Susan Tegel) concentrate on later time periods.¹⁸ The brilliance of this approach derives from its recognition that while we do not have direct access to Oppenheimer's actions, we do have immediate access to sources *about* Oppenheimer's deeds. Practitioners of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* encourage us to use this distinction profitably and to read the many stories about Oppenheimer not as a way of learning something about the court Jew but as a means of

exploring common Christian attitudes toward German Jews much more generally.

Like any other approach to the historian's predicament vis-à-vis the sources about Oppenheimer's life, concentrating on the historical reception of the story has its drawbacks. Three are especially noteworthy. First, studies of historical reception have a tendency to be excessively technical and at times outright unreadable. (This is especially the case with Gerber's extraordinarily detailed study.) Second, they are based on the same problematic distinction we have noticed between historical truth (which supposedly came first) and legend (which allegedly came later). And last, they shift the attention away from Oppenheimer as a historical figure. Almost by definition, practitioners of *Rezeptionsgeschichte* focus on later echoes of Oppenheimer's story rather than on Oppenheimer himself.

Each of the four approaches outlined here has its flaws, but each also has its advantages. Empirical attempts to find out what really happened during the last several years of Oppenheimer's life are extremely important, but in their pretension to know the truth they often mislead the reader. Stern's and Emberger's decision to keep silent about important aspects of the case can be appreciated for exactly this reason, but the price they and their readers pay seems far too high. Fictional treatments of Oppenheimer's life solve the problem by dispensing with historical facts altogether: this is their strength from the reader's point of view, but also their fundamental weakness from the historian's perspective. And finally, *Rezeptionsgeschichte* brings the sources back in, albeit at the price of a very technical language and indeed a tendency to avoid questions of historical facts altogether.

New work on Oppenheimer's case needs to combine elements of previous approaches to the story as a way of overcoming their individual weaknesses. It should tell us something about the historical events of the trial (Haasis) without always pretending to know who Oppenheimer "really was." It should keep silent where appropriate (Stern, Emberger) without discarding the story altogether. It should take fiction seriously (Feuchtwander, history of reception) without turning itself into a novel. And it should redirect attention to the primary sources (Gerber, Tegel) without metamorphosing, like Echo in the ancient story, into nothing but sound. *Exeunt* Stern, Haasis, Emberger, Hauff, Feuchtwanger, Harlan, and Gerber. Enter polyphonic history.

Polyphonic History

When one can't trust any of the available sources, one should resist the urge to reduce all of them to a single narrative. One ought to follow the advice of the great Greek historian Herodotus and report what the sources say without necessarily believing them. One should quote the sources at length, giving the reader a taste of their complexity, their contradictions, and the personal writing styles of their authors. But the historian 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. And he or she should always try to get beyond what the sources describe and reach toward the very act of their creation: who their authors were, when and how they were crafted, for whom they were composed, in what genre, and for what purpose. In a nutshell, when a historian can't trust any of the sources, he or she should write a polyvocal, critical work of scholarship: a polyphonic history.

Polyphonic history explores the lives of individuals in the past and the way they narrated events around them. Who were the people who wrote about the events of Oppenheimer's case? Why did they write, when, and for whom? What did these writers include in their stories, what did they exclude, and what cultural code guided them in making these decisions?

The pages of this book examine four such accounts, all fundamental to understanding Oppenheimer's trial and execution: three accounts that tell the same swath of the story from the perspective of people who met Oppenheimer in person, and a fourth that recounts the story from the point of view of a more distant observer. The book begins with the case of Philipp Friedrich Jäger, the judge-inquisitor who wrote the factual part of Oppenheimer's verdict and thus the basis for his death sentence. Although no other story in this book will take us closer to the issue of Oppenheimer's alleged crimes, the significance of Jäger's story goes well beyond factual issues alone. By reconstructing Jäger's life story and reading, as closely as we can, the document he submitted to the court, we shall be able to reveal important connections between anti-Semitism in general and Oppenheimer's particular case. Crucial in this respect will be Jäger's participation in another political trial in Württemberg less than two years before Oppenheimer's arrest.

Following closely on the footsteps of Jäger's story, the book will turn to the stories of two men who visited Oppenheimer during his last days. Christoph David Bernard was a university lecturer with a problematic past who met Oppenheimer on the eve of the execution and composed what is surely the most dramatic account of Oppenheimer in his last days. The question of its factual veracity aside, Bernard's story contains a profound theological truth and is furthermore key to deciphering many of the other

testimonies during Oppenheimer's trial. The same could be said about the life and work of Mordechai Schloss, a Jewish notable who stood behind the publication of the only contemporary Jewish account of Joseph Süß's life and death. Schloss's own life story, and the important text he helped publish about Oppenheimer, together reveal much about the fraught relationships among Jews in 1730s Stuttgart. A careful reconstruction of this relationship will challenge many common assumptions about Oppenheimer's trial, its causes, and its implications.

The fourth and final chapter in this book concentrates on David Fassmann, one of the earliest known biographers of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer. Fassmann was a litterateur and fabulist from Leipzig who, though he lived far from Württemberg, somehow managed to anticipate some of the best modern literature on the historical figure of Jew Süß. Fassmann's life story and his several treatments of Oppenheimer's life story will help us understand at least some of the reasons why, even as it unfolded, the scandal surrounding Oppenheimer's trial reached well beyond the confines of the small duchy of Württemberg. It should also help us appreciate the tangled nature of Oppenheimer's case: how reality and repute, truth and fiction, were wound around each other in his story as if in a skein.

One can certainly read each of these four accounts separately or in a different order from that in which I present them in the following pages. This, indeed, is a fundamental aspect of this book. Taken together, however, the four accounts also create a whole that is larger than the sum of its individual parts. By exploring in quick succession the lives and works of Jäger, Bernard, Schloss, and Fassmann, we are about to see Oppenheimer portrayed from different angles: from up close and far away; in public, in the interrogation room, and in prison; in a legal, social, and

theological light; and in Christian and Jewish terms. We will even see some of the storytellers portray each other in their separate accounts. We should not take a single word in these accounts for a faithful description of reality. But when we explore their authors' lives with care, and when we read them closely and patiently one after the other, we will learn, despite all the prevarications, fabrications, and contradictions they contain, a great deal that is meaningful and indeed true.

The polyphonic nature of this book is evident in its methodology, in its overall structure, and in the presence of long passages from the original sources among its pages. It is also manifest in my decision to include short dialogues between me and an imaginary reader after each chapter. It is highly unusual for this device to be used by a professional historian, and my employment of it is sure to cause some controversy. I use it, however, for a reason. Over the past several years, while presenting different parts of this book in the United States, Europe, and Israel, I was simultaneously fascinated and taken aback by my colleagues' reactions to my polyphonic methodology. The author-reader dialogues in the book are by no means an attempt to tell future readers of this book what to think. Rather, they are my way both of responding to some obvious objections to my methodology *and* of acknowledging their validity. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction in terms, I ask the reader to remember Plato's famous definition of thinking as a kind of discourse between the soul and itself, and, indeed, the multivoiced form of the Platonic dialogues themselves. Conflicting arguments are the stuff from which thinking is made. At least in that respect, all thoughtful historical writing, explicitly or implicitly, is always polyphonic history.

First Conversation

READER: This is all very fine and good. But this polyphonic history of yours, hasn't it been done already?

AUTHOR: To some extent, certainly. American historians such as Richard Price, Laura Otis, and above all James Goodman most definitely paved the way for the kind of multiperspectival, polyvocal history you will find in the pages of this book. I have learned a great deal from these historians' successes and not a little from what I consider their failures.¹⁹

READER: You're avoiding my question. If it has already been done, why do it again? After all, isn't the purpose of many of these works simply to show, by composing Rashomon-like accounts of historical events, that the truth is always in the eye of the beholder, that everything is socially constructed and therefore also relative?

AUTHOR: My friend, the realization that the world looks different from different perspectives cannot possibly be the bottom line of a good work of history. Indeed, as a conclusion for a historical study it seems to me to be utterly banal. What I am setting out to do in the following pages is different. I use the multiperspectival, polyphonic nature of lived experience as my starting point, not as my destination; it is a belief that informs what I'm about to do rather than a conclusion toward which I'm driving.

READER: I'm not sure I follow, but it certainly sounds very ambitious.

AUTHOR: Enough talk. Here comes our first protagonist. The year is 1745, the place is Stuttgart, the scene a funeral.



FIGURE 4. J. A. Fridrich, d. J. Portrait of Philipp Friedrich Jäger, 1745.
Source: UB Tübingen, L XVI 18.2.