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### **Jud Süß: A Cinematic Representation of Jews in Germany**

Imagine being born into the world knowing your life will become a legend persisting for centuries after your death. Joseph Süß Oppenheimer became one of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century's lucky few court Jews as a councilor to the Duke of Württemberg and ended his life hanged for a list of crimes that became so famous he is still spoken of into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Art historians discuss Süß Oppenheimer for numerous depictions of him awaiting hanging and being hanged from the late 1700s. Literary scholars talk about him because of Lion Feuchtwanger's 1920s play based on Süß Oppenheimer's life. Süß Oppenheimer is perhaps most spoken of in the film world, however, as a result of the 1940 Nazi propaganda film, Jud Süß. Directed by Veit Harlan and influenced by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, the film repeatedly has been called one of the most virulent and hateful films ever created. The film's basis is Süß Oppenheimer's rise to power at the court of Württemberg and his resulting demise, with a clearly antisemitic slant intended to incite a fear of Jews in the film's viewers. The film employs traditional stereotypes of Jewish physiognomy, morality, character and habit, and a sense that Jews must be cast from German society. This strain of the Süß Oppenheimer legend is a most striking representation in German literature and film of the Jew as a harmful outsider.

#### **Historical Background**

Historians have decided Joseph Süß Oppenheimer was born in February or March of 1698 in Heidelberg, Germany (Haasis, 12). He was not born in a ghetto as were many Jews at the

time, but rather to a family who rented space from a Christian (Haasis, 12). He came from a well-connected Jewish family as his uncle, Samuel Oppenheimer, was a contractor for the German Elector Karl Ludwig and money-lender to Leopold I of Austria (Sachar, *Courting Freedom* 1). As a young man Süß Oppenheimer followed in his uncle's footsteps by gaining acquaintance to Carl Alexander, son of the duke of Württemberg, and Ernst Ludwig, landgrave of Darmstadt (Haasis, 76).

Before he was eighteen he was already delighting the cupidity of the landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt whom he served as private banker. Süß had a highly refined instinct for ruthless and adventurous speculation; and he was blessed, as well, with an attractive appearance and a suave manner which he employed to good advantage in his career. (Sachar, *Jewish History* 25)

In his career, Süß Oppenheimer was not only a private banker, but also a purveyor, gem-collector and later a financial administrator (Sachar, *Jewish History* 25). In 1734, Süß Oppenheimer became a purveyor of military goods and unofficial advisor to Carl Alexander (Haasis, 153). Süß Oppenheimer became the court's official financial administrator before the end of 1735.

Süß Oppenheimer wielded a large amount of power as Württemberg's financial administrator: "With his grip on the state economy, [he] managed to become a major influence in Central Europe at a time when most of Europe's Jews were locked off within ghettos" (Sachar, *Courting Freedom* 2). With so much power under his thumb, Süß Oppenheimer was bound to have both supporters and enemies. The duke, one of his few supporters at court, lauded him for his "genius for discovering new sources of revenue" (Puzo, 2). Süß Oppenheimer made many enemies by taking bribes from government contractors, and also because he was a Jew allowed to move freely in Württemberg during a time when Jews were not allowed to enter the city. He

was known as a religious skeptic and had numerous Christian mistresses (Lowenstein, 372). The people also grew frustrated with Süß Oppenheimer as financial advisor because the duke constantly needed money and Süß Oppenheimer found ways to obtain it. This led to unrest in the population and the citizenry prepared to revolt around the time of Carl Alexander's death (Haasis, 361). After Carl Alexander died in 1737, the people of Württemberg jailed Süß Oppenheimer and tried him for: "Amterschleichung (ambitus), Fälschungen, Majestätsverbrechen oder so gut wie (quasi) Hochverrat" (Haasis, 386). Süß Oppenheimer was found guilty of these crimes and sentenced to death by hanging: "A special thirty-five foot gallows with an iron cage was erected in Stuttgart's public square and amid the rejoicing of thousands of people, he was placed in the cage and the rope that had been placed around his neck was drawn" (Puzo, 2). Süß Oppenheimer's death on February 4, 1738 was recorded by numerous sources, in journals and other written accounts, historical record and works of art, that have come down to modern times (Graetz, 30). "In our century there have been two major retellings: Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *Jud Süss* [sic] (1925) which attempts to exonerate oppenheimer [sic], and the infamous Nazi film directed by Veit Harlan (1940)" (Puzo, 2). Harlan's film is the most famous retelling of Süß Oppenheimer's story, and as such is a telling example of how Jews were portrayed by Germans to German and European audiences through the Second World War.

#### The Antisemitic Film

Harlan's Jud Süß was contracted by Goebbels to be a propaganda tool in the guise of an entertaining but historical film, "insidious rather than blatant, dramatic rather than documentary, and 'historical' rather than 'political'" (Cocks, 1). As if to illustrate this need for the film to be thought of as a historical work, the film begins with the words, "The events portrayed in this film are historical fact," sprawling across the screen in German with English subtitles. Although the

film is created after a historical event, it has a definite antisemitic slant. When Goebbels read the screenplay in 1939 he wrote in his diary, “Manuskript zum Film ‘Jud Süß’ gelesen. Von E.W. Möller. Ausgezeichnet geworden. Der erste wirklich antisemitische Film” (Mannes, 30). After contracting Harlan to direct the film, Goebbels kept a close eye on production and editing in every stage of *Jud Süß*’ production to make sure the film fit with the Nazi ideals his ministry promoted (Mannes, 31). “After Jud Süß’ premiere, Goebbels noted in his diary he thought the film was a successful work of propaganda: “The premiere of *Jew Süß* [sic]. A very large audience with almost the entire Reich Cabinet. The film is an incredible success. One hears only enthusiastic responses. The whole room raves. That’s exactly what I had hoped for” (Rentschler, 149). After such a successful opening, the film was shown in movie theaters around Germany and throughout Europe, generating good reviews even in countries not ruled by Nazi antisemitism: “The young Italian critic Michelangelo Antonioni responded to the film’s Venice Festival showing with great enthusiasm: ‘We have no hesitation in saying that if this is propaganda, then we welcome propaganda. It is a powerful, incisive, extremely effective film’” (Rentschler, 153-154). Regardless of whether or not the film was contracted under the antisemitic Nazi propaganda ministry, the real antisemitism of Jud Süß comes from the message it sends, through Harlan’s use of a combination of the Nazi message, barriers against assimilation and Jewish stereotyping.

#### Stereotypes in the Film

Jud Süß uses many age-old Jewish stereotypes to make the Jews and Süß Oppenheimer’s character diabolical, stretching the historically-based legend to the limits. The Jews as a collective people, based on the ones in Süß’s neighborhood, are dirty, toothless, lascivious, gossipy and greedy:

In einem dunklen schmierigen Kaftan gekleidet empfängt Oppenheimers Sekretär Levi mit dem Gestus hinterhältiger Unterwürfigkeit den Gesandten des Herzogs und bittet ihn herein. Der Film zeigt jedoch nochmals die Judengasse, um dem Zuschauer drei weitere antisemitische Stereotypen vorzuführen. Die erste Figur mit einem langem Messer und blutiger Schürze weist auf die jüdische Schächtrtradition hin. Die zweite Person ist ein alter Greis, der sich neben einem leichtbekleideten Mädchen aus dem Fenster lehnt. Auch wenn nicht klar wird, ob damit seine Geliebte oder Tochter gemeint ist, wird die sittliche Fragwürdigkeit der Szene deutlich. Mittels der Unterhaltung des Schächters mit dem Greis über Süß Oppenheimers Geschäftspraktiken wird die Geldgier der Juden angedeutet. Nachdem der Greis bezweifelt hat, daß Oppenheimer dem Gesandten des Herzogs Geld leihen wird, antwortet der Schächter mit jiddischem Akzent: “Er wird ihm geijben, er wird. Viel wird er ihm geijben, weil her hat Käpfchen. Er soll ihm geijben, daß wir kennen nehmen, nehmen, nehmen!” (Mannes, 35)

The many stereotypes in this passage are not alone in the film. Jews are portrayed also as all looking the same. Actor Werner Krauss was cast to play all of the Jewish roles in the film except Süß and the extras: “Which teaches the audience a lesson in anti-Semitic physiognomy: all Jews look the same. Krauss’s sneaking, gesticulating figures with their leering and Yiddishisms anchor anti-Semitic notions of Jewishness as well” (Weinstein, 8). By having one character play several roles, the Jewish characters begin to look and act the same to the viewer. The Jewish religion is also addressed with stereotypes, especially with the notion that Judaism is all about revenge: “Bete nur zu Deinem Gott, bete nur, denn nicht nur ihr Christen habt eine Gott. Wir Juden haben auch einen und das ist der Gott der Rache. Auge um Auge, Zahn um Zahn”

(Mannes, 45). This statement comes when the virginal Dorothea has come to beg Süß to spare her husband, who sits across the street in a torture device. This presentation seems to be saying that not only is the Jewish religion vengeful, but the Jews are glad to act on cues from their God. The religion is also shown as false through Rabbi Loew's reading of the duke's horoscope, which he "divines" after taking cues from Süß. Not only do these divinations give Süß what he wants, but they are supposed to give the rabbi an outcome Süß promised him—Jewish power over Württemberg. This action carries into another stereotype, cleverness. Germans in the film consider all Jews clever and sneaky, and the Germans say they must try to be smarter than the Jews: "Klüger, viel klüger müssen wir sein! Die Juden sind ja gar nicht klug, die sind nur schlau" (Mannes, 37). Another classic Jewish stereotype is that of the clever, conniving Jew, who is often too clever for the poor Christians.

In keeping with stereotype of Jews as "schlau," Süß is the cleverest of them all in the film. Before he gets to court, Süß tells the duke's messenger he will take care of his Jewish looks if they let him through the gates at Stuttgart. A dissolve takes the viewer from Süß's very Jewish appearance to one of him riding in his carriage wearing courtly finery, clean shaven and his hair tied back in period fashion. "Süss's dissolve introduces a problem in Stuttgart—the presence of unrecognizable [sic], assimilated Jews" (Weinstein, 8). The simple dissolve points to the Jews' ability to assimilate into German society, and within the negatively stereotypical framework of the film, points to the dangers of letting "the other" into mainstream society as he will surely become indistinguishable from the rest of the German populace. Although Krauss' characters all looked the same, the most conniving character in the film is able to blend in with the Germans and ingratiate himself to their leader. One obvious factor in Süß' success is his worldly abilities and charm. One effect of his wordliness is his portrayal as an internationalist: "Hat er den keine

Heimat?’ und er gesteht ‘Doch—die Welt!’ Dorothea vermag anhand dieser Antwort nicht den wurzellosen Internationalismus des Juden zu erkennen, den der Film hier darstellt“ (Mannes, 36). He has no home and he is at home everywhere, yet another classic Jewish stereotype. Süß is well-traveled and feels at home everywhere, which was a sentiment long seen in Germany as a threat to national identity.

#### Assimilation Issues

One debate surrounding the time of Süß Oppenheimer’s life was whether or not Jews could assimilate into German culture. Assimilation was an issue well into the early 1900s, until the Nazi government decided on the *Endlösung* that would remedy the situation altogether. The issue of assimilation is raised and illustrated for the Nazi cause in the film, essentially beginning with Süß’ dissolve into a German-looking courtier and extending to his fall from power. While Süß blends in with the Germans for the most part, there are places where his character encounters barriers that separate him from being completely German (Weinstein, 8). When the film begins, Süß lives on the outskirts of Stuttgart with all the other Jews while the gentiles live inside the city (Weinstein, 8). This is a physical barrier Süß crosses easily after promising to change his appearance. Another barrier he assimilates across is the line of power—into the duke’s inner circle:

That Süß can convince the duke to lift the ban on Jews shows his ability not only to surmount the boundary himself, but to render it more permeable for all. Süß’s power results in a reign of atrocities in Württemberg: inflation, torture, rape, revolution, and unjust execution—just to name a few. These horrifying effects of Süß’s penetration of Stuttgart’s boundaries, enabled by his passing, help convince the viewer that Jews and

Aryans should remain separate and that the distinctions between them should remain clear. (Weinstein, 10)

The duke allowed the Jew to have the powers he used on the people, which can be interpreted as a message that Jews may look harmless, but they most certainly will take a mile if you give them an inch. This not only enforces a stereotype, but it acts as an example of the damage Jews can do if they are allowed to assimilate into German society.

Another reason Jud Süß gives for viewers to reject positive notions of assimilation is the scene where a blacksmith, Hans Bogner, refuses to pay to keep a part of his house that happens to be located on Süß' road. Süß removes half of Bogner's house and leaves it open and gaping like a "dollhouse." The reaction to this event relates to the idea of the Jew destroying German personal safety: "The shots of Bogner's half house, exposed to natural elements as well as to the public, highlight Süß's role in destroying structures meant to protect the German people" (Weinstein, 10). This threat to the safety of the home is also a threat to safety for the family and German person as a private individual. Another assimilation threat to the private individual in Jud Süß concerns the purity of the German bloodline. Süß, played by Ferdinand Marian, was a visually appealing character and received "'baskets' of love letters" from female fans after Jud Süß came out (Weinstein, 11). Süß' sexual appeal may have been included on purpose, not just because the historical Süß Oppenheimer was said to have a similar appeal, but to give credence to the stereotype that Jewish men want to have their way with virginal German women and muddy the pure, Aryan bloodline: "the sexual ambivalence may have furthered an anti-Semitic agenda by exaggerating the sexual and racial threat of the Jew. The tension between the threat of the Süß figure and his sexual appeal—underscored by his charm and success—could confirm the need for the Nuremberg laws and ultimately promote genocide" (Weinstein, 11). Süß' appeal

may have been included to underscore how easily innocent German women could be swayed by a handsome face and charming words, just as Dorothea acts initially after accepting Süß onto her carriage.

The threat to the German bloodline is not just a subtle, visual nuance in the film. After Süß' hanging, a proclamation is read regarding the status of Jews in Württemberg now that Süß is out of the way:

Die Landstände verkünden durch meinen Mund den Willen des württembergischen Volkes: Alle Juden haben innerhalb dreier Tage Württemberg zu verlassen. Für ganz Württemberg gilt hiermit der Judenbann! Gegeben zu Stuttgart 1738. Mögen unsere Nachfahren an diesem Gesetz ehern festhalten, auf daß ihnen viel Leid erspart bleibe an ihrem Gut und Leben und an dem Blut ihrer Kinder und Kindeskinde. (Mannes, 49)

The proclamation has a resounding message against the case for assimilation. Rather than allowing Jews to infiltrate German bloodlines—“dem Blut ihrer Kinder und Kindeskinde”—and lessen the quality of German lives, Jews will no longer be allowed to try to assimilate. The importance of this message is signified in that Jud Süß came out just before the Nazis began shipping Jews to concentration camps for the *Endlösung*.

#### Film as a Propaganda Tool

Jud Süß was used by the Nazi propaganda ministry to incite hatred against the Jews. This is not just a statement of opinion, as: “Before 1945 it [the film] was shown to SS commandos before they carried out missions against Jews; after the war it was used in the Near East for anti-Israeli propaganda” (Rentschler, 150) and “the film became mandatory viewing for the German military police and the S.S. and was presented to audiences where concentration camps were

being built” (Puzo, 2). The negative portrayals of Jews and Judaism in the film made it possible to evoke a feeling of disgust in viewers, consequently making it less of a problem to have the country’s Jews herded off to work and death camps. During the Nuremberg trials following World War Two, Harlan was the only film director tried with the Nazis. Jud Süß “became the central exhibit in Veit Harlan’s postwar trial for crimes against humanity” (Rentschler, 150). The film was perceived enough of a threat to Jewish safety by the court that Harlan, the film’s creator, was convicted, even though he claimed he only created the film as he had because Goebbels insisted. He was later exonerated, but the film was still condemned as a work of antisemitism that came to fruition from Goebbels’ coercion. Today the film Jud Süß is not shown in Germany except at closed government screenings and for educational purposes (Rentschler, 150). The film is available elsewhere in the world, and is a favorite of white supremacist groups in the U.S. (Rentschler, 150). It is considered “Nazi cinema’s most controversial and contested film” and “a hate film” (Rentschler, 149).

## Conclusion

Jud Süß has remained a controversial film into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It has the misfortune of being created under contract by the Nazi government’s propaganda minister as a tool to educate the German masses on the dangers of allowing Jews into society. The film uses stereotypes that have been passed down in German literature for centuries: Jews are ugly, they all look the same, they are conniving, they cannot assimilate, those who do assimilate are a problem of public and personal safety, Jews want to infiltrate German bloodlines and take control of German lands, their religion is harsh and out of touch with nature, they are greedy, etc., etc. (Spector, 468). The sheer number of negative stereotypes contained in this film is enough to explain Jud Süß’ status as a “hate film.” That it came out just before the mass of extermination of the Jews sends this

same message, that the film was created to incite hatred. The film was created by Germans, stars German actors and actresses, and glorifies the German triumph over Jewish evils. Süß' hanging at the end of the film is a message to Jews to stay out of German matters and a call for Germans to make sure the Jew stays out. Jud Süß is an antisemitic, clearly negative portrait of Jews. It is based on a historically factual event but bolstered by centuries of German society viewing the Jew as an outsider. This culmination of years of hatred and uneasiness with the "oriental other" living on German soil culminates in Jud Süß, earning it a place on the roster of German works offering readers and viewers a negative portrayal of Jews.

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