

Veit Harlan and *Jud Süß* – Conrad Veidt and *Jew Süß*

Veit Harlan and Conrad Veidt were both associated with the flowering of German stage and cinema in the Weimar Republic. Veidt, born in 1893, was already a major figure, starring in productions like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* that made cinema history. Harlan, seven years younger, was beginning to make a name for himself on the stage. When Hitler came to power their paths diverged diametrically. Harlan was an opportunist, made his peace with the regime and acquired a reputation as a director of films. Later he and his second wife, Hilde Körber, became friends of Goebbels. In April 1933 Conrad Veidt, who had just married his Jewish third wife, Lily Prager, left Germany after accepting the role of the German Commandant in the British film *I was a Spy*. When he returned to Germany the Nazis detained him to stop him taking the lead role in the projected British *Jew Süß* film. He eventually got out, but his acceptance of the role made the breach with his native country irrevocable. Six years later Harlan was persuaded by Goebbels to take on the direction of *Jud Süß*, the most notorious but also one of the most successful of the films made under the auspices of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry. Kristina Söderbaum, then his wife, took the female lead. In the meantime Conrad Veidt had moved to Hollywood and in 1942 appeared as Major Strasser, the German officer, in *Casablanca*, a role for which he is probably best known in the Anglo-Saxon world. He died in 1943 of a heart attack at the age of only 50. After the war Harlan went on trial for crimes against humanity, mainly because of his part in producing *Jud Süß*, but was acquitted. Films about the Württemberg Court Jew Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, better known as Jud Süß, thus link these two important figures of the German film industry, but the connection is circuitous.

Jud Süß is the most famous of the German Court Jews of the 17th and 18th centuries. He is also the least characteristic, for his high profile, aristocratic life style, romantic exploits and dramatic rise and fall between 1733 and 1737 were by no means typical for Court Jews. They were bankers, agents, factors and providers of credit and goods in peace and military supplies in war, to many of the princes, from the Emperor down, who reigned in the German-speaking lands of Central Europe. Their economic importance was considerable and as diplomatic agents and informants they might also play a significant political role. On the whole they preferred to operate in the background rather than in the limelight, for theirs was a position of considerable risk. They were necessary instruments for their rulers, often amassed great wealth, but they might find themselves suddenly and unceremoniously tossed aside. One can interpret their role as facilitators of the transition from the feudally organized territory to the modern state, but sometimes they were the means by which lesser princes squeezed money out of their subjects so that they could live above their station.

Jud Süß was untypical not only because of his personality, but also because of the exceptional situation in Württemberg. This mainly Protestant duchy had a constitution, which left considerable power and much financial control vested in the estates, thus limiting the scope for princely absolutism. Charles James Fox, the Whig leader in the British House of Commons, once remarked that there were only two constitutions in Europe, the British and that of Württemberg. The constitution did not really make the South German state into an early version of a liberal state. It gave a certain amount of power to a usually corrupt clique of oligarchs. It did not prevent the expulsion later in the century of Friedrich Schiller from his native country. Jud Süß

had become an adviser and financial agent to Duke Karl Alexander, a general in the Austrian service and member of a branch line of the ducal house of Württemberg. The Duke served under Prince Eugene against the Turks and in the War of the Spanish Succession. He was made a field marshal and was the Austrian regent in Serbia. To please his Austrian masters he converted to Catholicism, which also enabled him to marry a Princess of Thurn and Taxis. He was always short of money until he unexpectedly inherited the dukedom of Württemberg in 1733. He became the Catholic ruler of a mainly Protestant territory, determined to exert his control over his economically run-down dominion and make it into an important power with a considerable army, a kind of South German Prussia. It would become a bastion against French expansion into the area.

Jud Süß was of great help to Karl Alexander in increasing his revenues, but historians are still doubtful to what extent the Court Jew was the originator or merely the executant of the Duke's policies. Sidelining the estates and squeezing more money out of the population was not popular and much of the hostility was directed against the Court Jew. The bond between Jud Süß and his master was closer than was normally the case between court Jews and their rulers. During the last year of their association a cooling of the relationship seems to have occurred. This may have been because Jud Süß was not in favour of an alleged plot hatched in 1737, to return the country to Catholicism by using force against the leading men in the estates. As the plot was about to break the Duke suddenly died on 12 March 1737. In popular tradition the event was accompanied by all sorts of mysterious events, the sudden fall of a large mirror from the wall of the ducal castle, the appearance of a magician about to tell the Duke his fate, thunder, lightning and fire.

Jud Süß was immediately arrested and soon subjected to a harsh imprisonment in chains in a dark dungeon. He was accused of treason, embezzlement, and breaches of the constitution. He and various highly placed women with whom he was accused of having had affairs were subjected to intrusive interrogations. As his health and prospects of survival deteriorated, he, who in his days of grandeur had shown little religious inclination, recovered his Jewish faith, and refused all attempts to convert him. Eventually, in February 1738, he was executed in front of a large crowd, by being hoist on to the gallows in a cage painted red. It was a story made for mythologizing and literary embellishment. Thus there was the rumour that he was not really a Jew but the off-spring of an affair between Georg Eberhard von Heidersdorff, a Habsburg commander whose career had ended in disgrace, and Jud Süß's mother. This was taken to account for the arrogant demeanour of the Court Jew in his heyday and his success with aristocratic women.

Among the many stories, pamphlets and books written about Jud Süß the best known was a short novella published by the German romantic writer Wilhelm Hauff in 1827. It painted Jud Süß as a villain, something that could not be done without anti-Semitic overtones, but also left room for sympathy in describing how he was brutally crushed, when many other villains were allowed to go scot-free. Hauff was shocked that a blatant miscarriage of justice could take place in his native country less than a century previously and favoured the emancipation of the Jews.

The posthumous fame of the Court Jew spread far wider through the publication of the novel *Jud Süß* by the German-Jewish novelist Lion Feuchtwanger in 1925. It

became one of the best-known historical novels of the twentieth century, eventually selling over three million copies, many of them in such different markets as Britain and the United States on the one hand and the former Soviet Union on the other. The novel, like Hauff's novella, introduces characters and plot lines which are not strictly historical, for example Naomi, the beautiful and innocent daughter of Jud Süß, whom the Duke attempts to seduce. Feuchtwanger had written a play about Jud Süß in 1917. His portrayal of Jud Süß in the novel was influenced by the fate of Walther Rathenau, the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic who was assassinated in 1922. Both are Jews who rise high and are destroyed by anti-Semitism. Rathenau was preoccupied by the dichotomy of *Macht* and *Geist* and Feuchtwanger makes his Jud Süß embrace the suffering of his fall as an atonement for his previous unbridled pursuit of power and wealth. Through his reversion to Judaism Jud Süß builds a bridge from Western materialism to Eastern *nirvana*. Feuchtwanger uses language influenced by expressionism, harsh, breathless and obtrusive. It makes the book exciting to read, but it was an early work and its success notwithstanding not one of the author's best. Feuchtwanger's next novel *Erfolg* [Success], published in 1930, earned him the fierce hatred of the Nazis, from Hitler and Goebbels down. It is a panoramic picture of Bavaria in the early 1920s, at the time of the Nazi Beer Hall Putsch. It satirizes Hitler as Rupert Kutzner, the garage mechanic with the gift of the gab, who becomes leader of the Truly Germans [Die wahrhaft Deutschen]. Feuchtwanger's books were burned in 1933 and he was one of over thirty prominent artists and politicians who were stripped of their German citizenship in August of that year.

The British Jew Süß Film, with Conrad Veidt, is based on Feuchtwanger's *Jud Süß*. In 1933 it was planned to film Feuchtwanger's *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, a novel hastily written to expose the brutalities of the Nazi seizure of power. The plan had the support of the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, but when it became apparent that Hitler was firmly in power official encouragement ceased. The policy of appeasement was beginning. Normally the British film censor would not allow anything that could cause either political or moral offence, The Jew Süß script caused unease because of the explicit and strong language used in the novel, which was toned down. There was less concern about any political implications, an implicit attack on the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime, because the film was a costume drama based on a best-seller. The political message only became an issue after the film's release. Politics was thought to be detrimental to box office success, when the public expected films to be mainly entertainment. It was a time when the British film industry sought to rival Hollywood and break into the American market. It had considerable links with the German film industry even before 1933. German technicians, set designers and actors worked in Britain and there were also commercial links. 1933 brought Jewish and other opponents of the regime to Britain, among them Lothar Mendes, the director of *Jew Süß*. It was a lavish production, made on what was then a very high budget. It was not particularly innovative technically, but is remembered primarily for the performance of Conrad Veidt in the title role. The New York premier was attended by Albert Einstein and Charlie Chaplin. The former sent Lion Feuchtwanger a photo of the occasion signed by himself with the inscription, in Berlin dialect, "Dem Meister von det Janze" [to the master of it all].

Michael Balcon, the Jewish head of production at Gaumont-British, had more than anyone else been responsible for bringing *Jew Süß* to the screen, but many years later he regretted that its political message had not been stronger. Nevertheless, the British

film infuriated the Nazis and led to official protests. It was regarded as a Jewish concoction, designed to show Jews in a good and Germans in a bad light, and was not allowed to be shown in Germany. When it was shown in Vienna there were demonstrations against it, although the cinema manager denied that there had been any, and finally the Vienna police banned further showings. There may have been a behind-the-scenes intervention to pull a film judged to be philo-Semitic. This was ironic because the Schuschnigg regime, authoritarian, Catholic and often anti-Semitic, had only shortly before been subjected to a Nazi coup d'état, during which the Chancellor's predecessor Dollfuss was murdered. The regime was saved by Mussolini, who moved troops to the Brenner. Hitler had to distance himself from the events and the first attempt to expand National Socialism beyond Germany had ended in a fiasco. The Austrian ban on *Jew Süß* provoked British diplomatic protests, but to no avail.

The Conrad Veidt-Lothar Mendes version of *Jud Süß* may well have implanted in Goebbels the desire to launch a counter attack, but for the moment he held his fire. Films with a political message were no more popular with the German than with the Anglo-Saxon public. *Hitlerjunge Quex* was among the few political films made that Goebbels actually liked, but anti-Semitism figured only marginally in German film making at this time. Even Goebbels thought it important to provide entertainment and distraction for the cinema-going public, as well as propaganda. The film industry was still a private industry orientated towards box-office success. In late 1938, round about the time of *Kristallnacht*, Goebbels issued a directive that each film company should make an anti-Semitic film. The Nazis were after the *Anschluss* and the take-over of the Sudetenland in a triumphalist mood. Goebbels was trying to re-establish his position with Hitler, damaged by his affair with the Czech actress Lida Baarova. Veit Harlan, whose divorce from Hilde Körber was pending, became involved in the Baarova affair, for Körber had helped Goebbels in his assignations with the Czech actress. As a result Harlan's relations with the Propaganda Minister suffered, but both Goebbels and Hitler still admired the director's work.

The immediate idea to make a film based on the *Jud Süß* story came from Ludwig Metzger, a script writer at the Terra Film Company. When he met with little enthusiasm at the company he took the idea to the Propaganda Ministry, where it was well received. It became an officially commissioned project [*Staatsauftrag*]. Metzger claimed to base himself on the Hauff novella, but this had many features that in Nazi terms were ideologically incorrect. The love story between a Gentile and a Jewess, the fictional sister of *Jud Süß*, is central to Hauff's version, but by this time sexual relations between Jews and Gentiles were punishable under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. However, any link with the British film and the Feuchtwanger novel could thus be covered up and not many people in the Propaganda Ministry bothered to read Hauff. The genesis of most film projects is tortuous and it was particularly true of this one. Moreover, after the war those involved had an interest in obscuring their role in what became the most notorious piece of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda. In the summer of 1939 another script writer, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, a diehard Nazi, was brought in, probably to give the script a more telling anti-Semitic thrust. In the meantime preparations, such as construction of sets and preliminaries to casting, went ahead. After the conquest of Poland the project assumed greater urgency in the eyes of Goebbels. There had been difficulties with casting, for no prominent actor was

keen to take the leading role of Jud Süß and be typecast ever after. Nor was Goebbels satisfied with the Metzger/Möller script.

It was at this point, late in 1939, that he sacked the previous director, who had had such difficulty with the casting, and brought in Veit Harlan, who also rewrote the script. The names of the two previous script writers remained in the credits. Harlan played hard to get, but he may well have exaggerated his reluctance after the war. Goebbels not only wanted Harlan's talent as a director, but through his standing to obtain a first-class cast. On 12 December 1939 the Propaganda Minister noted in his diary: "Especially the Jud Süß film has been splendidly rewritten by Harlan. It will become *the* anti-Semitic film." [Manuskripte zum Presse-und Jud Süßfilm studiert. Besonders der Jud Süßfilm ist nun von Harlan großartig umgearbeitet worden. Das wird der antisemitische Film werden.] Obviously Goebbels recognized very clearly the propaganda value of the rewritten script, even if Harlan after the war tried to make light of it.

Harlan managed to enlist a well-known and fine actor, Ferdinand Marian, as Jud Süß, a role he had refused prior to Harlan's appointment. Werner Krauss, one of Germany's most distinguished actors, had already been cast to take on several Jewish roles in the film. Heinrich George, also well known, was the Duke. The glamorous Swedish actress Kristina Söderbaum, whom Harlan had recently married, was Dorothea Sturm. In the Harlan version she, every inch an Aryan woman, is the chief object of the Jew's amorous attention, from which she finally escapes by drowning herself, thus avoiding a destructive mixing of races. It was in Nazi eyes an ideologically correct end. Her father is played by another distinguished actor, Eugen Klöpfer.

The success of Harlan's film was due not only to his own imaginative direction and the excellent cast. Harlan's adaptation of the Metzger/Möller script is a clever combination of virulent anti-Semitism with a compelling love story, violence with sex. This combination was conveyed to potential audiences in much of the poster and other material disseminated to popularise the film. It usually features Marian as the Jew, lascivious yet electrifying, with Söderbaum, glamorously Aryan but also sexually vulnerable to the Jew. These ambivalences made the film far more effective than unrelieved anti-Semitic propaganda would have been. In the early 1940s the film ranked sixth among the thirty most popular German films and was seen by over 20 million people, many of them in occupied Europe. It was very successful in unoccupied France and continued to be frequently shown in the final years of the war. Its anti-Semitic message struck home and there is evidence from many places that it led to physical attacks on Jews as audiences left the cinemas. Himmler was delighted with the film and ordered it to be shown to the SS, the police and SS camp guards. On the other hand, when Veit Harlan after the war sought to deny his intention to promote anti-Semitism through the film, he cited the fact that Ferdinand Marian had received fan-mail by the wagon-load from female admirers for his portrayal of Jud Süß.

In Harlan's film there could obviously be no acknowledged link to the British film or the novel on which it was based and it has plot lines not to be found in the previous film or the novel. Nevertheless Veidt and Feuchtwanger hover over the Harlan-Goebbels version like Banquo's ghost. Harlan confirmed after the war that he and Goebbels had private showings of the British film and that others in the production team were encouraged to view it. Minister, director and actors may not all have read

the novel, but were only too well aware of it. Marian confessed after the war that he was familiar with the Jud Süß story through Hauff and Feuchtwanger. In 1941 Feuchtwanger published in America an open letter to some of the main actors in the film, Werner Krauss, Eugen Klöpfer and Heinrich George. He reminded them how before 1933 they had all worked with him, the author, in stage versions of his novel and imagined the circumstances under which they might have been induced to take part in so evil a distortion. He warned them that a good actor cannot act against his convictions without becoming a less good actor. [Sonderbarerweise kann ein guter Schauspieler nicht gegen seine Ueberzeugung spielen ohne ein weniger guter Schauspieler zu werden.] The historical Jud Süß was in his own day a potent mixture of good and evil and so was the trail he left in the 20th century.

Edgar Feuchtwanger