

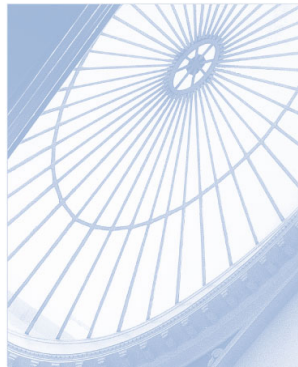
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ANNA HÁJKOVÁ and MARIA VON DER HEYDT, *Die letzten Berliner Veit Simons: Holocaust, Geschlecht und das Ende des deutsch-jüdischen Bürgertums* (Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2019), 140 pp. ISBN 978 3 95565 301 9. €17.90

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ and MARIA VON DER HEYDT, *The Last Veit Simons from Berlin: Holocaust, Gender, and the End of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie*, trans. from the German by Justus von Widekind and Jos Porath (Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2019), 140 pp. ISBN 978 3 95565 316 3. €17.90

In July 1945, 27-year-old Etta Veit Simon wrote a letter to her mother Irmgard, giving her some insights into her survival in Theresienstadt concentration camp. She recalled her first year of imprisonment, when she had ‘had one sickness after the other, and with a fever of more than 40°C every time: dysentery, angina, scarlet fever, kidney inflammation, jaundice, tonsillitis and abdominal typhoid!’ (p. 120). She also provided her mother with details about the death of her older sister from tuberculosis in 1943, one year after their deportation to Terezín: ‘By the end Ruthchen had galloping consumption, the larynx, lungs and intestines were flooded with tuberculosis bacteria. She ran a high fever for six months before her heart finally failed’ (p. 120).

Quite a few letters of this kind were sent around that time. Many more could no longer be written because the majority of inmates, like Etta’s sister Ruth, did not survive the German concentration and death camps. Some survivors had no one to write to because they were the last living members of their family.

In Etta’s case, her mother survived the war as the Gentile widow of a Jewish man in Berlin. Somewhat unusually, Etta’s letter to her mother contains the following remark: ‘I believe I have made a good name for ourselves in Terezín; VEIT-SIMON is a name with a solid reputation here’ (p. 120).

Who were the Veit Simons and why, despite everything she had experienced, was it still important for Etta to have a name with a reputation? The publication under review here, *The Last Veit Simons from Berlin*, sheds some light on the matter. Anna Hájková, Associate Professor at the University of Warwick and a historian of

the Holocaust, and Maria von der Heydt, Affiliated Researcher at the Center for Research on Antisemitism in Berlin and a partner in a Berlin law firm, have researched the background of the Veit Simons. In their book, they tell the dramatic story of one of the oldest and best-known Jewish families in Berlin.

The Veit Simon family had been living in Berlin since the seventeenth century, when one 'Jew Simon' received official permission to settle there. During the eighteenth century, the family started to consolidate their position as members of the upper middle class. For generations, family members worked as merchants and bankers and were also involved in Berlin's cultural life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After 1933, in spite of their former wealth, they fled their hometown or were deported and murdered in Auschwitz or Theresienstadt. The Holocaust marked the irrevocable end of the family's roots in Berlin, as was the case for almost all German Jewish families there.

Hájková and von der Heydt focus on the family's history, starting with Hermann Veit Simon (1856-1914), a well respected *Justizrat* (Judicial Councillor) who successfully combined his legal training with his family's commercial tradition. He and his wife Hedwig (1861-1943), née Stettiner, had four children. Their two daughters Eva (1884-1944) and Katharina (1887-1944) were deaf-mute as the result of a childhood infection with measles. The sisters lived together in *Katharinenhof*, a house specially designed for them north of Berlin, which was also used as a weekend home and meeting place for the whole family. With their mother Hedwig, Eva, a painter, and Katharina, a trained gardener, were deported to Theresienstadt three months after their nieces Ruth and Etta. Neither Hedwig nor her two daughters survived the Holocaust.

Ruth and Etta's father was Hermann Veit Simon's son Heinrich (1883-1942). Despite his father's opposition, Heinrich married Irmgard (1889-1971), née Gabriel, the Gentile daughter of a Protestant family friend. Though she herself remained Protestant, Irmgard raised their children in the Jewish faith and celebrated their bat and bar mitzvahs. The family lived a progressive liberal Jewish life of the kind represented by the prominent rabbi Leo Baeck, a friend of the Veit Simon family.

With their siblings Harro (1911–2011), Ulla (1915–2004), Rolf (1916–1944), and Judith (1925–2016), Ruth and Etta grew up in a typical bourgeois household with a maid, cook, and gardener in their villa in Dahlem, Berlin. The family hosted large dinners and parties with dancing and enjoyed travelling abroad. Their wealth was the result of the father's professional success as a lawyer and notary. His law firm in the heart of Berlin established itself as one of the most renowned, including far beyond the metropolis. He successfully protected his family from the economic crises after the First World War and managed to maintain a secure and comfortable lifestyle until he was murdered in 1942.

By the end of 1938, however, culminating in the events of the November Pogroms, the family had lost its social status. That same year, three of the Veit Simon children fled Germany. Ulla moved to London with her husband and their newborn daughter, Rolf emigrated to the Netherlands, and Judith found refuge in the United Kingdom through the *Kindertransport*. Since the oldest of the siblings, Harro, had already left for Spain in the early 1930s, only Ruth and Etta stayed behind in Berlin with their parents. Both were trained graphic designers, and Ruth illustrated a children's book before struggling with tuberculosis. She had to undergo treatment in various clinics over the years. Meanwhile, Etta was obliged to do jobs she hated, such as helping out in a Jewish school and doing twelve-hour shifts at the Zeiß-Ikon lens factory.

As *Geltungsjuden* (who were considered to be Jewish by virtue of their membership of the Jewish religious community), the sisters were fully exposed to persecution and were threatened by the Berlin deportations, beginning in October 1941. From 19 September 1941, they were required to wear the yellow star in public. Seven months later, Etta tried to flee with the help of her father—a vain attempt which resulted in their arrest and, ultimately in Heinrich's murder. Not long after their arrest, both sisters, Ruth and Etta, ended up in Terezín, whereas their Gentile mother Irmgard stayed in Berlin until the end of the war.

Hájková and von der Heydt's book reveals the story of an almost forgotten German–Jewish family that was well known and socially recognized until the Holocaust broke it apart. As one of the few wealthy bourgeois families, the Veit Simons might not be a typical

example of the German-Jewish fate. But they show how sooner or later a family's wealth and social status faded during the Holocaust, leading to escape or persecution.

The story is engagingly written, highlighting the biographies of selected family members, and draws on interesting personal primary sources in order to reconstruct the family's fate. The main body of this rather slim book is divided into twelve sections, each focusing on a specific topic relating to one family member, such as 'Ruth's Tuberculosis' or 'Heinrich's Murder'. The sections are roughly chronological, making it easy to follow the course of events. The authors also provide a helpful family tree at the beginning of the book (I would have preferred additional dates of birth and death for better orientation) and many images to illustrate the narrative. Unfortunately, they do not use the historical photographs as a primary source, leaving them a little disconnected from the text. An outstandingly concise appendix contains selected personal letters from the family's private papers, giving us an insight into the treasure trove that Hájková and von der Heydt have uncovered. Given that this is a short study of only about 100 pages in length, the reader is left curious to learn more about the last Veit Simons from Berlin.

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