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Jewish cattle traders in the German Countryside, 1919-1939: Economic trust and antisemitic violence

by Stefanie Fischer, translated by Jeremiah Riemer, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2024, 374 pp., $49.00 (Paperback), $48.99 (eBook), ISBN 9780253068729

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REVIEW ESSAY

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Jewish cattle traders in the German Countryside, 1919-1939: Economic trust and antisemitic violence, by Stefanie Fischer, translated by Jeremiah Riemer, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2024, 374 pp., $49.00 (Paperback), $48.99 (eBook), ISBN 9780253068729

An old historiographic conflict, remembered by hardly anyone, was waged between the late Arthur Hertzberg and Steven Zipperstein. Hertzberg, citing the insight of his father, said that Jews coming to America during the period of mass immigration were overwhelmingly the poorest of Europe's Jews. Zipperstein refuted this generalization. Chiefly on the basis of my ancestors' experience, I tend to side with Hertzberg. My people who crossed the Atlantic were impoverished. Despite their precariousness, family groups strongly identified with particular trades: those of my father were, like the majority of Jews, in the *shmate* or clothing-making business. My mother's family occupied a tiny niche as dairy farmers. It may be indulgent to engage in family lore that is not directly relevant to the excellent book under consideration, *Jewish Cattle Traders in the German Countryside, 1919–1939: Economic Trust and Antisemitic Violence* by Stefanie Fischer, translated by Jeremiah Riemer. I shall relate the following stories, however, because I believe they complement Fischer's superb analysis in a number of respects.

My mother, Gloria Berkowitz (1929–2017), born Goldie Goldstein, was raised on a kosher dairy farm in Penfield, New York, in 'upstate' or Western New York State.[1] This is some 340 miles from New York, New York. Penfield, which is now an affluent suburb of Rochester, was at that time a village well outside of Rochester. I do not know when the family established the farm, but I assume that it was sometime around 1900. My grandfather, Haskell Goldstein (1904–2002), sold it in the mid-1950s.

One of the repeated claims concerning life on the farm was that my grandfather's brother, Morris, had broken the jaw of a young man from the Gonzenhauser family in two places, with one punch. The Gonzenhausers had sold the Goldsteins a calf, which was blind (Fischer notes that the 'absence of complete information' in the business was a grave offense [p. 97]). The sellers withheld that crucial fact when the deal was made. Making it even worse was that the Gonzenhausers were, themselves, competing dairy farmers. The irreverent Goldsteins probably would not have been offended by the supposedly 'antisemitic' depiction of 'The Cow Trade' in the Zizenhausen figurine reproduced and discussed by Fischer (p. 72).

Although the Goldsteins did not say much about the Gonzenhausers, it was clear that the Goldsteins did not much care for the Gonzenhausers, whom they described as 'German Jews.' The Gozenhausers were rich, and the Goldsteins, from Eastern Europe, were poor. Apparently, the Gozenhausers were the only dealers from whom the Goldsteins bought their Holsteins. The Gonzenhausers were not, by the Goldstein's estimation, endemically 'crooked.' However, in the instance of the blind calf, the normal level of trust between them was violated. It was a massive infraction, which called for an immediate, extreme response. This kind of frontier justice, usually associated with the Wild West, was how it worked in Penfield. The idea that trust was an essential, consistent, and highly significant component in the relationship between Jewish cattle dealers and the (mainly) non-Jewish farmers with whom they conducted their business is an immense part of the expertly interwoven narratives and interpretations offered by Fischer. 'Jewish cattle dealers,' she writes, 'depended on [non-Jewish] farmer's economic

ability to pay back their debts, and [non-Jewish] farmers, in turn, depended on a [Jewish] dealer's willingness to grant them credit' (p. 5). My own family, therefore, themselves a minority within a minority, were in a role similar to the non-Jewish 'farmers' in this book.

There remain, beyond the golden thread of 'trustworthiness,' further ties between the Goldstein story and Fischer's book. The place-name occurring perhaps more frequently than any other in *Jewish Cattle Traders* is Gunzenhausen, in 'the northern Bavarian district of Central Franconia' (p. 2). The initial, supremely appropriate quote in the book is from a Gunzenhausen town council member of November 1934: "'We need the Jews because, without Jews, even today I cannot get my cattle to the customer. The Christian cattle dealers just always want to sell livestock below price, which is not the case with the Jews" (p. 1). As Fischer makes crystal clear, the timing is striking: it was almost 2 years since the Nazis took power, having pushed for boycotts against Jews from the moment Hitler took office (pp. 142–143). Her book, though, is not focused on 'political resistance to Nazi policies.' It explores 'one important group – Jewish cattle traders – and explains the social and economic networks in which they operated' (p. 1). Fischer details, nonetheless, that at the beginning of the Nazi era, 'it was still possible for Jews' to belong to 'the Reich Association of the National Cattle Trade, and thus to continue practicing their occupation' – which was dependent on their being members of that body (pp. 141, 144–146). Even more remarkably, 'the directive of 25 January 1937, about trade with livestock failed to result in a definitive exclusion of Jews from the cattle trade' (p. 171). The author succeeds in significantly contributing to the history of German Jews and the Holocaust.

Despite the different spellings, it is reasonable to think that the Gonsenhauser family of upstate New York originated in Gunzenhausen. They were likely to have emigrated to the United States in the mid-to-late 19th century. That family's ancestral home is indeed a constant focus of the book. It extends even beyond the major time frame of Fischer's analysis. The author informs us that some of the Jews who had been persecuted and driven out by the Nazis found refuge and even were able to re-establish themselves in upstate New York. That may very well have been, at least in part, due to the Gonsenhausers. In a word, they were charitably inclined. To this day, a Gonsenhauser Family Fund persists, which was 'created in memory of a Brighton [Rochester, New York] dairy farmer to support farm animal welfare and agricultural education, particularly about dairy, urban, and/or sustainable farming.'[2]

Roughly two decades after the Goldsteins sold their farm, their lives were strongly influenced by the Gonzenhausers – but the Goldsteins might have been oblivious to the part played by the family to which they had, in important respects, been beholden. With the dairy farm behind them, my grandparents, Haskell and Ray (Rachel or Rokhel), bought and ran a general store in Ontario Center, New York, in the 1950s and 60s. My grandfather also worked as a carpenter, and in the mid-1960s, they bought a property in rural Webster, New York, with capacity for growing several kinds of vegetables – most of which they gave to family members. Some were sold in front of the house. In their 70s, still living in Webster, my grandparents took in two foster boys (born in the late 1950s or 1960s), the Hurwitz's, and later, two more boys, the Copages, of roughly the same age(s). Both sets of boys had been residents in 'Hillside,' which we knew as Rochester's Jewish orphanage. Hillside, though, aspired to family placements for the boys. In the 2010s, my sister and I learned from a former social worker for Rochester's Jewish community, Naomi Title, that it had been very difficult to locate homes for the boys, and my grandparents were tremendously appreciated by Hillside. Their care of the pairs of brothers was, according to Mrs Title, regarded as an extraordinary and extraordinarily successful case. It was only in looking up 'facts' for this review that I discovered that the Gonzenhausers were involved in Hillside's history.[3]

My grandfather, Haskell, was born into a traditional family and saw himself as an Orthodox Jew. His father, Julius (1865–1936), was officially the farm's owner, but his mother, Dora

(1864–1955), was clearly the boss of the dairy farm. Rochester's Farm Directory of 1917 specifies that they had 118 acres and grew potatoes.[4] Ray had been raised in a non-kosher home, but Haskell was adamant about keeping kosher, and he prayed three times a day. He put on tefillin in the morning. But he hardly ever went to shul, the nearest of which was several miles away. He and the family went to a synagogue only on high holidays and stayed over in a nearby hotel. He knew liturgy, but he had no knowledge of the Hebrew language beyond reading it and singing it for prayers and ceremonies. His family spoke Yiddish, which they called 'Jewish.'

In contrast to how Orthodox practice (in the United States) has changed, my grandfather would occasionally eat in a 'regular' restaurant – but eating dairy and/or fish. As opposed to some of the subjects of Fischer's book (pp. 112–113), Haskell and his family did not deal at all with hogs, and the whole family kept kosher. It was tricky, though, to maintain the dietary laws because kosher meat was not very accessible, and the non-Jewish hired men on the farm ate unkosher food – which was prepared by the Goldstein women. The men, however, did – like the cattle dealers discussed by Fischer – eat and drink 'in taverns' with non-Jewish men with whom they did business (pp. 75–76).

Near the close of *Jewish Cattle Dealers*, Fischer notes the significance of the American Jewish Agricultural Society in helping displaced German Jews to settle in upstate New York in the 1940s and 50s – so much so that 'by the 1960s, nearly 90 percent of all cattle traders in New York State had a German Jewish background' (p. 198). This same organization had helped save the Goldstein family farm from bankruptcy in the early 1930s. My grandfather told me that he spotted an ad in Rochester' *Jewish Ledger*, answered it, and fortunately received assistance.

Fischer's study is divided, along with an introduction and conclusion, into four hefty chapters with brief titles: 'A Social History of Cattle Trading in Weimar Germany,' 'Trust and Cattle Dealing' (which also is intertwined throughout the book), 'Constituting Trust through Official Authority,' and 'Destroying Trust by Force under Nazism.' Although it is a matter of personal and editorial taste, I prefer the style of organization adopted by Fischer and her editor(s) at Indiana University Press. The prose itself handles the work of rationalizing connections between passages and analyses rather than subdivisions into numerous headings and subheadings. We learn that 'Jews adopted a monopoly-like position within a specific group of cattle dealers, namely the structurally strong, medium-sized cattle trading firms . . .' (p. 25). They also engaged in wholesaling, becoming 'quasimonopolists' (p. 29).

Her reconstruction of the 'Schmuser' activity is particularly fascinating (pp. 26–28). 'Shmooze' is a term well-known in The Queen's Yinglish. Leo Rosten in *The Joys of Yiddish* says that it 'Rhymes with "loose"; some pronounce it to rhyme with "ooze." . . .. Both verb and noun, *shmooz* means a friendly, gossipy, prolonged heart-to-heart talk – or, to have such a talk. "They had a little *shmooz* and settled everything."' Rosten asserts that 'I have never encountered a word that conveys "heart-to-heart chit-chat" as warmly as does *shmooz*.'[5] Compared with countless other businesses, cattle dealing 'entailed a variety of risks and great legal insecurity.' Hence, risk and trust – and schmoozing – are bound together (p. 61). Risk was especially pronounced during the Great Depression (pp. 89–92, 120–122, 126–129). Market forces in the immediate wake of the Great War, World War I, had, however, seriously 'eroded trust in the cattle trade' (p. 94). Along with identifying the distinctive terminology (pp. 78–89), Fischer's use of photographs, maps, and meticulous descriptions of home furnishings and 'equipment' is consistently superb. Her integration of gender (pp. 193–195), including 'gestures and symbols' (pp. 68–71), is fluid and exemplary. Following Trude Mauer, Fischer finds that cattle trading men 'were not regarded as preferred marriage partners by Jewish women' (p. 47). Alas, Jewish men

outside of major urban areas often faced such a stigma. At the most extreme end of social relations, the 'violence and terror,' along with the charge of 'criminality' (pp. 160-–162), 'plunder' (pp. 179, 181–186), and imprisonment (pp. 164–166) meted out on the cattle dealers is deeply distressing. The perpetrators were among those who were not only known to their victims: frequently, the thugs were those with whom they had enjoyed good relations – and no small measure of confidence and trust (pp. 133–139). Nazis had slandered and injured cattle dealers for more than a decade before 1933 (p. 102).

While the relevant contexts are well-illustrated and fleshed out, Fischer's perspective would have been enhanced by familiarity with the classics of Gerald Feldman, especially concerning the myths versus the realities of the Great War crises and their aftermath. She also would have benefited from George Mosse's insights into volkish nationalism (pp. 6, 13, 100–103), which engaged attitudes about the countryside and rural life. The research of George Vascik on antisemitism in rural Germany, including antisemitic 'cooperative' efforts (pp. 3, 5, 104–105, 140–143, 152–153, 205–106), and Christoph Kreutzmuller's survey of Nazi-era signage would have enhanced her work. Adam Tooze's analysis of 'the black market' during Nazi times could have supplied important insights (pp. 102–103). However much this additional scholarship might have enriched Fischer's book, it may be seen as complementary rather than challenging her stellar monograph and fitting comfortably with the fundamental nexus of 'economic trust and antisemitic violence.' While Fischer did painstaking research in numerous archives and libraries, had she visited the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, she might have found that Heinz (later Henry) Kissinger, whose family appears in her text (pp. 53, 55, 124, 194), had applied – and was rejected – from the Zionist agricultural school in Petach Tikvah in Palestine before landing in the United States.

While Fischer's book is a tour-de-force, the stance she adopts is sincerely modest. She is aware that there is a great deal left to be said and interpreted about Jewish history as seen from the countryside. Her intention is for her work to be suggestive in the broadest sense. Indeed, anyone who has ventured into Jewish history outside of urban centers knows that there is a lot there, and the history is complicated. Fisher shows, though, that overwhelmingly, non-Jewish Germans became cruel and violent toward men, women, and families whom they had known well, and for the most part, these relationships had been built on trust that was earned through experience. So, it is uglier than the abstract notion of 'man's inhumanity to man.' This was persecution, robbery, and murder, ignited and defended by a grotesque body of lies – that were molded to fit very particular circumstances. It is one of the two or three most important and original books on antisemitism to have appeared in the last quarter-century.

Not surprisingly, Fischer warmly endorses the judgment of the late historian Steven Lowenstein. On the basis of a fraction of the data surveyed by Fischer – yet with phenomenal breadth and depth of knowledge of German-Jewish history – Lowenstein wrote that '"Neither antisemitism nor economic resentments were enough to stop the Jewish cattle trade, only action from above in 1936–1937 revoking the trader's licenses … put the Jews out of business"' (p. 171). One of the most telling pieces of evidence in this book is a Gestapo report of 1 August 1937, whose author was 'startled by the realization that there is still a large percentage of farmers doing business with Jews' (pp. 173–174). A 'final occupational ban' did not occur until July 1938 (p. 177). I have more than the usual appreciation for *Jewish Cattle Traders in the German Countryside*, a great work of scholarship, and an accomplished addition to the largely ignored 'rural' field. As a bonus, even if inadvertently, it richly illuminates aspects of my family's history surrounding issues of 'trust' in the hinterland of upstate New York, which have, for the most part, been forgotten.

Notes

1. At her funeral, Rabbi Andrew Bachman included details about Goldi's life on the farm, which was tremendously appreciated.
2. At https://racfs.fcsuite.com/erp/donate/list?showlist=1 (accessed 9, January 2025).
3. https://www.historicbrighton.org/1850-farms-defined/
4. Farm Directory 1917. Monroe County, New York. Transcribed and enhanced by Beverly Renza Veness, Haymarket, VA, copyright 2006. Posted at the Monroe County Library System website. Taken from American Agriculturalist Farm Directory and Reference Book, Monroe and Livingstone Counties, New York. A rural directory and reference book including a road map of Monroe and Livingstone Counties. Originally published in 1917 by Orange Judd Co. At https://roccitylibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/1917Farm_Directory.pdf
5. Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: Pocket, 1970), 360.

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