

Franz Rosenzweig - Religious Philosopher from Kassel

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The following introduction by the two editors Dr Eva Schulz-Jander and Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik gives a good overview of the presented book.



Introduction

Eva Schulz-Jander / Wolfdietrich Schmied-Kowarzik

In many German cities like Hamburg and Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt/Main once lived wealthy Jewish citizens, so also in Kassel. Names like Aschrott, Blumenfeld, Gotthelft, Nußbaum and Rosenzweig are examples. All of them have, well into the thirties of the last century, contributed significantly to the economic, cultural, political and social wealth of Kassel. They were at home here.

But what does that mean? Can one look positively at German-Jewish history prior to Nazi times. Considering that the Shoah casts its long shadow not only into our own time, but also on the time that went before subsequently questioning their impressive accomplishments, accomplishments that even the rising anti-Semitism could not seriously impede. Nevertheless, we should not only view the significant contributions of Jewish industrialists, politicians, scientists, creative artists and intellectuals only in light of their subsequent catastrophe, but appropriately honor their participation in the development of German society. After all, German-Jewish history was, "in the European context up to the rise of National Socialism definitely considered to be a success story."^[1] Shalom Ben-Chorin expressed this in his public speech on the occasion of the first International Franz Rosenzweig Congress in 1986,^[2] saying that two names mark the beginning and the end of this "success story": Moses Mendelssohn and Franz Rosenzweig. If Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) in the enlightened 18th century represented the admission of Jews into German society, so Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) represents, on the eve of National Socialism, their terrible end. In a way we can view the life and work of one of the last representatives of German Jewry as a mirror image of German-Jewish history. In the short span of his life that lasted merely 43 years, he went through

the stages of this fragile structure. Like many of his contemporaries, he too felt the attraction of German culture, the temptation of Christianity, the discontent with the superficial religious life of the Jews, as he had come to know it. The present volume attempts to look at this way by fanning out the different stages of Rosenzweig's life.

It will be opened by Ursula Rosenzweig's tracing of the Rosenzweig family's history. Isaac Rosenzweig, progenitor of the Kassel Rosenzweigs, came to Kassel in about 1815, as a teacher. Like so many Jewish families in Germany, they had taken the road from east to west, from a Jewishly lived life into an assimilated life in Germany, where Judaism, reduced to lip service, was only of minor importance for the conduct of Jewish life. Franz Rosenzweig was born in 1886 into such an assimilated and successful family. He revered German culture but eventually went a different way. Myriam Bienenstock traces this intellectual path that leads him from German idealism across Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to what he termed the "new thinking" that nourishes itself consciously from Judaism and faces the challenges of the religious quest for meaning. Rosenzweig studied history and philosophy, and experienced, like many other young Jews of his time, the lure of German culture, which had outstanding thinkers like Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel. These he had to work through before he could find his innermost core. Jules and Josiah Simon show in their contribution how Rosenzweig's critical analysis of Hegel, even the struggle with him and the then current interpretations of Hegel secured him a place among Hegel scholars, but served him also as a foil to find his own way of thinking. This culminates in Rosenzweig's opus magnum, *The Star of Redemption*, on which Wolf-Dietrich Schmied-Kowarzik elaborates.

Jewish life and thought took place in an environment marked by Christianity, and there was even something like the seduction of Christianity, almost incomprehensible for us today. Thus, his close friend Eugen Rosenstock and his cousin Hans Ehrenberg had converted to Christianity. Not all Jews who converted to Christianity did so, to quote Heinrich Heine, for an entrée-billet to German society, they did so out of deep conviction. So also Rosenzweig, after many intense conversations with his Christian friends, found himself on the threshold of conversion, before he opted for a consciously led Jewish existence. Two consequences arose for him from his decision – "So I remain a Jew" –the need for a renewal of Jewish life and an intense conversation between Jews and Christians as equals, out of a respective Jewish and Christian self-understanding – as Inken Rühle explores in her contribution, and Reinhold Mayer concretizes it in Rosenzweig's love letters to "Gritli", Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy, the young wife of his friend Eugen Rosenstock. Rosenzweig's critical analysis of German idealism led him out of a theoretical, academic thinking towards a thinking that can be called existential and dialogical, in other words, into real life. So it was only fitting, that the renewal of Jewish life would have to be done in a pedagogical work, bringing together teachers and students. This issue is addressed with different but complementary accents by Regina Burkhardt Riedmiller and Ephraim Meir. The way Franz Rosenzweig designed this for the Free Jewish House of Study in Frankfurt/Main, is an imminent Jewish decision. "That the right reading of the Torah demands the teaching of what one has learned, is not a triviality. [...] If, however, one has to teach Torah in order to carry it further, so it is probably also necessary that the student asks questions,"^[3] so Emmanuel Levinas in his Talmudic readings, and this was exactly Franz Rosenzweig's concept for the Free Jewish House of Study in Frankfurt/Main, a lively dialogical exchange between teachers and students to lead both into a consciously Jewish existence. Very soon after he had founded the Free Jewish House of Study, his terrible total paralysis became apparent, an illness that not only bound him to his bed, but eventually also robbed him of the ability to speak. How Rosenzweig still remained in conversation with his contemporaries, reports Benyamin Maoz. It was a physical dieing against which a lively and creative spirit braced himself. His sickbed lasted seven long years Shalom Ben-Chorin compares this slow death with the onset of the violent death of European Jewry, ten years later.^[4] Moses Mendelssohn had once translated the Pentateuch from Hebrew to the German, thus to facilitate access to this language and thereby to German society for Jews who did not speak the German language. At the end of his life, already marked by the disease, Rosenzweig went in the opposite direction. He tried, together with Martin Buber, through their German translation of the Scriptures to

make the linguistic uniqueness and beauty of the Hebrew text accessible again to an assimilated Jewry, to which the original text had become alien, as Stefan Schreiner demonstrates.

In the penultimate contribution Micha Brumlik examines Rosenzweig's thinking in light of our time, his relationship to Zionism and the idea of a Jewish state, as well as the continuation of his thought by Emmanuel Levinas. The last contribution by Eva Schulz-Jander follows Rosenzweig's tracks in Kassel and the implications of his thinking in an international context. This volume is thus a bringing home of Franz Rosenzweig to his native city of Kassel, but also shows that the thoughts of the Jewish religious philosopher of Kassel went out into the world, and even today still have an effect.

This book brings together, for the first time in this series, authors from three continents. We wish to thank all of them for the timely submission of their manuscripts and for the good cooperation. We would like to thank Dr. Alexander Link from the City Museum in Kassel for his kind assistance in obtaining numerous graphs and illustrations. Our thanks go also to Sabine Kemna and Renate Matthei of euregioverlag who accompanied and supported our work far beyond the usual. We have to thank Raymond Huessy for providing previously unpublished photos of "Gritli," Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy. Finally, we give thanks to the Kassel Savings Bank for making this publication possible.

[1] Dan Diner 1991: *Broken History*, p. 7

[2] Shalom Ben-Chorin, 1988: Franz Rosenzweig and the end of German Jewry, in: Wolf-Dietrich Kowarzik Smith (ed.), *The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)*, 2 vols, pp. 57ff.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas 1994: *Hour of Nations, Talmudic Readings*, p. 105

[4] Ben-Chorin, 1988, p. 63f.

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