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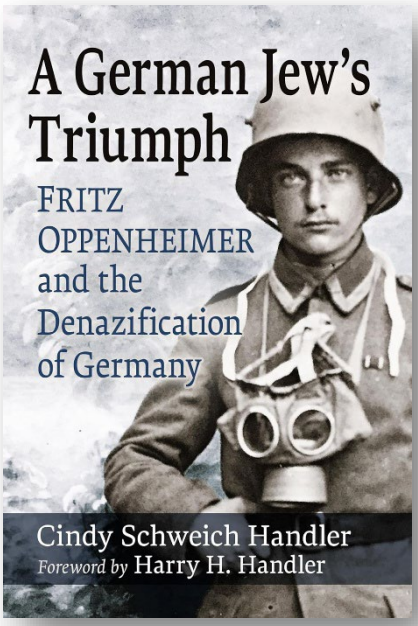

A German Jew's Triumph: Fritz Oppenheimer and the Denazification of Germany

Cindy Schweich Handler

Foreword by Harry H. Handler

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Review by Ilana Maymind. First published online on 20 February 2026 and will appear in the next volume of *The Independent Scholar.*

In this provocatively composed biography, Cindy Scheweich Handler presents Fritz Oppenheimer as a man of immense intellect, remarkable resilience, and survival skills. At the same time, the book raises challenging questions about identity, loyalty, and moral judgment in the context of Nazi Germany and postwar denazification.

Harry Handler's foreword situates Fritz as a long-standing presence in the family, complicating his wife, Cindy Schweich Handler's approach to writing. The personal proximity has likely shaped both the narrative perspective and the emotional stakes of the book. The foreword also discusses Handler's mother's decision to end her life on her own terms. This decision casts light on her father's values and sense of autonomy, revealing parallels in their insistence on self-determination and dignity. Harry Handler initially resisted reading his grandfather's diaries, but "9/11 was an impetus that changed his approach, and he felt the need to understand the forces that made his father the man he was" (6). This urgency intensified after his mother's death, making the diaries a critical tool for understanding both personal and historical legacies.

Fritz Oppenheimer emerges as a perennial outsider: a Jew in Christian Prussia, a German in the U.S. Army, and potentially an outsider in his own Jewish tradition.

Being Jewish was "assigned" to him by the Nazi regime rather than chosen. Jewishness appears primarily as a legal and racial classification rather than a cultural or spiritual commitment. Fritz and his family were more connected to Christian traditions, such as Christmas, than to Jewish practice. Fritz himself referred to being "of Jewish heritage" rather than Jewish, a choice that signals both detachment and self-preservation.

His patriotism toward Germany is a defining feature of his character. Before World War I, he was driven by loyalty and love for Germany, and this devotion persisted throughout his life. Yet Cindy Schweich Handler notes that "the war changed his view of the world" (41), and even as he maintained loyalty, she writes: "Fritz is loyal to his homeland, but something needs to change" (43). In Chapter 6, she observes that Fritz's patriotism, his "loud enthusiasm, former zeal," "had been replaced … by a sense of grim duty" (60). This shift signals a personal transformation in which duty supplants earlier forms of patriotic exuberance. Even as Fritz was awarded another Iron Cross, Schweich Handler notes: "It is an honor that represents his patriotism and sacrifices to the world at large and will retain its meaning even as what it means to be a German change" (63), highlighting the evolution of his understanding of national identity.

Fritz's initial inability to perceive the dangers of fascism is striking. He dismissed the rise of fascism in Italy as "just another exotic rite," and although Hitler's reputation grew in the 1930s, he and his wife Elsbeth focused primarily on economic opportunities rather than ideological threats. This reluctance underscores the perils of liberal assimilation and normalizing extreme movements.

His father Ernst's membership in the Association of German Jews, which promoted full assimilation and rejected Zionism, Marxism, and liberalism, might have inadvertently influenced Fritz's views on assimilation. The association insisted Jews should be "Germans of Jewish descent," loyal to Germany, opposed to Eastern European Jewish immigration, and willing to forgo a distinct Jewish national identity. This lens is evident in Fritz's response to anti-Jewish legislation: he emphasized his military service, awards, and "absolutely native German disposition" (93), while Elsbeth's diary notes that "Jews and those with Jewish heritage are being eliminated from the courts." The phrasing "Jewish heritage" rather than simply "Jew" signals both distance and internalized hierarchies within the Jewish community.

Fritz and Elsbeth initially regarded Nazism as addressing real concerns, albeit with only "small blemishes" (94). The realization that they were not merely Germans with Jewish ancestry, but Jews whom Germany would never accept, developed gradually. Even as Fritz planned an escape in 1935, he continued in 1936 to pursue recognition as a "permanent German," holding onto the hope of inclusion until exclusionary policies and social realities made that impossible.

After emigrating to America, Fritz faced new challenges. He wrote that he was "afraid that 'life in America means a new start, a new fight and everything connected therewith'" (130). He encountered American diversity but also pervasive bigotry (141). Though "not ashamed" of being Jewish, he remained reluctant to disclose his identity, reflecting both survival instincts and formative influences from his upbringing.

During World War II, Fritz retained a vision of himself as a "native German" and considered the Nazi era "a tragic aberration in the nation's long, proud history" (159). He asserted that Hitler "exploited human misery and hunger for order and security to unearth and install an incentive structure that rewards the worst human impulses—toward greed, envy, fear, and hate" (159). This perspective informed his approach to postwar reconstruction: he aimed for objectivity rather than vengeance. Schweich Handler notes the tension here: can loyalty and patriotism color perceptions of German culpability, and is it accurate to say, as does Schweich Handler, that it is not the German people as a whole who are responsible for what has taken place, but only a few (?) Nazi leaders (160)? The small number of Germans officially recognized as Righteous Among the Nations—651, likely closer to 3,000 in Berlin, representing only 0.0045% of a population of 67,000,000—further complicates any sweeping claim about collective innocence.

Fritz's legal work during denazification illustrates the challenges of impartiality. Schweich Handler describes his careful distinction among "militarists," "ardent Nazi sympathizers," and those "likely to act contrary to Allied interests and principles" (166). Success depended on the availability of "uncompromised" Germans, yet expediency may have limited a fully accurate assessment. She writes that Fritz believed "there are enough Germans who, as best can be determined, didn't actively support fascism and can be entrusted to

build the nation's future. Besides, with so many opponents to the Nazis killed, or in exile, this is the only path forward that makes sense" (211). This highlights the moral tension of necessity versus ideal justice.

In one memorable encounter, Fritz meets Keitel, chief of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht and Hitler's "yes-man." Keitel asks why Fritz's German is so perfect. Schweich Handler recounts that "nothing would have made Fritz happier than telling Keitel that he is Jewish and that 'they had much more in common than the Nazi could ever imagine, that yes, like him, he was a German native who had been raised as a proud and loyal Prussian, with every expectation of enjoying a high-profile, fulfilling career in his homeland; that they had both fought through the crucible of Verdun, been wounded, been promoted several times, and been awarded the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class for valor. That the single biographical detail of being of Jewish heritage made Fritz a pariah in his homeland, while Keitel was rewarded for his cruelty until his army lost the war'" (195–196). Fritz refrains from revealing his heritage, reasoning that "the fact that he is a patriotic American who is fulfilling his duty, and no other biographical details are necessary" (195–196). This raises questions about whether objectivity requires disowning one's own identity, and whether assimilation effectively demands moral compromise.

Fritz's insistence on seeing even his "bitterest enemies" as fully human (197), despite their treatment of Jews as less than human, and his observation that "I had the firm conviction that the defeat did not teach [Nazi leaders] any lesson" (197), highlight his moral rigor but also provoke discomfort. Was he vindicated? Did he need vindication? Would he have acted differently had Keitel known his Jewish heritage?

Cindy Schweich Handler further notes Fritz's understanding of Nazi motivations: "some Nazis joined not because of ideology but in hopes of personal gain or self-preservation" (209). This raises difficult questions about whether such opportunism makes Nazism more or less dangerous, and whether atrocities like these could recur.

Finally, her discussion of displaced persons camps underscores the prolonged suffering of survivors. She writes that "the army came to Europe to fight Nazis, and not to stand guard over their victims… many don't have patience for the way years of savagery can reduce humans to a primitive state," and that the so-called liberators "created the displaced Jews' prolonged misery" (213). Many Jewish displaced persons "had no clothing other than their concentration camp garb… while others, to their chagrin, were obliged to wear German SS uniforms" (213). Though E.G. Harrison criticized these conditions as comparable to Nazi brutality, Fritz worried that such statements would provoke antisemitic claims that "Jews want preferential treatment" and preferred improvements "without so much noise and excitement" (214). Cindy Schweich Handler notes that this stance shifts the burden onto victims and advocates, raising the uncomfortable question of whether pragmatism becomes complicity when public perception is prioritized over justice.

Even in the final chapters, Fritz's defense of industrialists like Thyssen and I.G. Farben, despite their complicity in genocide, reveals the persistent tension between legal reasoning, pragmatism, and moral accountability (228–229).

In conclusion, *A German Jew's Triumph* presents Fritz Oppenheimer as a figure of extraordinary skill, moral complexity, and intellectual discipline. Cindy Schweich Handler's work preserves his voice, his diaries, and the historical record, while also inviting readers to grapple with the discomforts of assimilation, restraint, and ethical judgment under extreme circumstances.

Ilana Maymind *(PhD Comparative Studies) earned her Ph.D. from the Ohio State University, and has published* Exile and Otherness. The Ethics of Shinran and Maimonides *(Lexington Press, 2020), "Exile as 'Place' for Empathy" in* Philosophies of Place. An Intercultural Conversation *(Hawai'i Press,2019), and "Learning from the Past: Exile and Ethics" in* Perspectives on Culture, Values, and Justice *(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). She is interested in diaspora and exile studies, and is a member of the Cambridge Scholars Religious Studies Advisory Board.*