

German-Jewish devastation unfolds in new book on the Scholem Family

Alanna Cooper | April 4, 2019

Gershom Scholem is all the rage now. A towering 20th-century intellectual, the publication of his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* changed the academic study of Judaism. That was in 1941. Now there's a sudden resurgence of interest in Scholem's life and work: In the past two years, six biographies about him and his family members have been published (several of them have been reviewed as a group in a [recent publication of Jewish Review of Books](#)).

With all this interest, I figured I ought to read one. I chose Jay Howard Geller's book, which came out just a few weeks ago. As a CWRU colleague, Jay has given me updates over the past few years about his research trips to Israel and Germany to study documents in the Scholem family archives. My curiosity was piqued. I was also drawn to the book's title - *The Scholems: A Story of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction* - which promises an account not only of this one particular family of renown, but of German Jewish history writ large.



Jay Howard Geller

Geller makes good on the promise. In his work, The Scholem family provides a lens on the major trends in Jewish life in Germany as they unfold over 125 years. The book opens with a poor baker, Marcus Scholem, who moves from a small village to Berlin, which was home to few Jews and not yet a large city. From this forebear, the family grows, they become German citizens, adapt to modernity, establish and expand a thriving printing business, become incorporated into the urban bourgeoisie cultural scene, and choose a variety of social, spiritual and intellectual paths to engage their Jewishness.

Yet, in spite of their improved legal standing in the aftermath of World War I, Jews are blamed for all sorts of social ills. Even – Geller tells us – “the massive increase in pork prices.” Insuperb forms of antisemitism soon give way to violence, disenfranchisement, then total loss of civil rights.

Many Scholem family members manage to escape Germany before it's too late. The famed Gershom moves to Jerusalem where he rises to prominence, single-handedly creating the academic field devoted to the study of Jewish mysticism. His siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles scatter to Shanghai, Tel Aviv and Sydney, Australia. Others – most notably Gershom's brother Werner, a leading member of Germany's Communist Party who served in the Reichstag – suffered brutal death at Nazi hands.

I was uneasy during the few days I spent reading *The Scholems*, experiencing the sort of queasiness you get when watching a horror movie that you've already seen before. You know what's looming at the end, but as you go along, you view the scenes through the characters' own eyes, and hope that somehow things turn out differently than they actually do. In this case: that dangerous nationalist forces will be kept in check, that Hitler will not rise to power, and that democracy will prevail.

I hoped – against all reason – that the book would end with the Scholem's print-shop still flourishing, and with the family still enjoying their lively get-togethers, and ideological sparring over lavish holiday dinners. Of course, the story does not end this way. And this information requires no "spoiler alert" because even before beginning the book, the reader knows where it's headed. Still, Geller's elegantly-crafted narrative reminds us that the Scholems and their fellow German-Jews could not have known what we know today with the benefit of hindsight.



Scholem Family on Vacation, 1913

The notion that one can never know just how devastating a trend will be until after it has crested, makes thinking about contemporary antisemitism all the more unsettling. Some argue that there's no need for alarm today: The United States has a stronger tradition of liberalism and a more resilient form of democracy than Germany ever did; and Jews are more welcome and integrated here than they ever were in Europe.

Still, the picture Geller paints of the broader political trends that gave rise to lethal forms of antisemitism in Europe last century – which *really had nothing to do with Jews at all* - reverberates today. After World War I, Germany's rise of extreme nationalism on the right, was coupled with the emergence of radical socialism on the left. Ultimately, Hitler's ascendance to power happened in tandem with the weakening of the centrist German Democratic Party (preferred by most Jews).

Talking with Jay over a cup of coffee in Shaker Heights' trendy new Van Aken Market Hall, I asked what sort of lessons he draws from the past. "I tend not to extrapolate to the present," he answered, "and do not politicize my classroom teaching." That said - Jay continued – he does not object when his students "make their own connections" between history and the contemporary moment.

I have certainly drawn my own conclusion from reading Jay Geller's rich, moving and thought-provoking depiction of the Scholem family story: Jews are safest when the middle prevails.

To learn more, register for Jay Geller's April 10 lecture, "[The Scholems: A Story of the German Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction](#)"

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