

Bernd-Wilhelm Linnemeier. *Jüdisches Leben im Alten Reich: Stadt und Fürstentum Minden in der Frühen Neuzeit.* Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2002. 831 pp. EUR 49.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89534-360-5.



Reviewed by Daniel Fraenkel (Independent Scholar [Jerusalem])

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Jews and Christians in Minden during the Old Reich

In the past few years, regional and local studies have added an essential dimension to our understanding of the pre-Holocaust history of the Jewish minority in Germany and its tangled relationship to the Christian majority. On the one hand, these studies, with their localized geographical focus, mirror the diversity of the Jewish experience under the fragmented political reality of the German Reich. On the other hand, the concrete local basis serves as an antidote to the sweeping generalizations and uncritical assumptions that have often plagued the historiographical treatment of the subject in the past.

Linnemeier's meticulously researched study of the Jewish population in Minden, from the Late Middle Ages to the beginning of the nineteenth century, is a valuable addition to a number of recent studies that have examined the history of individual Jewish communities in northwest Germany in the early modern period.[1] The tiny principality of Minden, the historical borders of which are more or less coterminous with the present-day Minden-Luebbecke district of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, is one of those few places in northwest Germany that can show a continued Jewish presence since

the 1540s. In the foreword to his hefty volume, the author defines his two-fold concern as, on the one hand, to do justice to the self-understanding of an ethnic minority whose connections and interests went well beyond the territorial confines of a small principality in the middle Weser region; on the other hand, not to lose sight of the detailed historical specificity of his theme as it manifested itself in the everyday life of those concerned. He characterizes his methodological approach as "Mikroanalytischer Zugriff bei gleichzeitiger Verankerung sowohl des fest umrissenen Untersuchungsraumes als auch der zu untersuchenden Gruppe in ueberregionalen Zusammenhängen" ("Microanalytic approach with the simultaneous anchoring of both the demarcated area and the researched group in their larger contexts," p. 28). While Linnemeier's intensive engagement with the primary sources and his painstaking reconstruction of the local milieu are among the strengths of his book, the overall contextualization—especially from the perspective of Jewish history—is on the whole less impressive.[2] The themes addressed range from the statistical-quantitative development of the Jewish population and its economic activities to Jewish-Christian relations and

the medieval institution of the *Geleit* (right of safe conduct or protection), which provided the legal basis for every Jewish settlement in the territory of the German Reich until and into the nineteenth century.

The book takes up the story from the first documentary evidence for the renewed presence of Jews in Minden in 1540, following their wholesale expulsion in the Late Middle Ages, to the end of the Old Reich in 1806. The relevant period, extending over more than 250 years, is unevenly divided by the caesura of the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia, by which the previously autonomous ecclesiastical principality of Minden passed in 1649 to Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg in lieu of Swedish Pomerania. In the first phase of development, from the second third of the sixteenth century to the outbreak of the Thirtys' Year War, northwest Germany experienced an economic and cultural boom, which offered promising economic prospects for the settlement of isolated Jews with their specialized money-lending activities. By the turn of the century, in 1599, the Jewish population in the entire territory had grown to 27 Jewish families with about 135 persons in all—a sizable figure by the standards of northwest Germany at the time. Only four of the Jewish families lived in the principal town of Minden, whereas ten families were reported for the rural township of Hausberge (p. 68). The increased immigration of the Jews, although hotly contested by Minden's *Vierzigerausschuss* (the representative body of the guilds) was fostered by the relatively liberal attitude of the princely rulers. During the Thirty Years' War (1633-34) town authorities more or less lost control over the right to issue protection letters. As a result of this loss, it became possible for a relatively large number of Jews to set foot in the town. In the years 1641-43, at the high point of demographic growth, eighteen adult Jews were reported for the town of Minden.

In his detailed analysis of the origins and family relationships of the new immigrants, Linnemeier devotes special attention to the Minden branch of the well-known German-Jewish Gans family. Seligmann Gans of Minden was a brother of the famous Jewish historian and astronomer David Gans, who dedicated his major *oeuvre Zemach David*, to his beloved brother in Minden. Although there is no direct documentary evidence for this, Linnemeier avers that David Gans, by dint of his connections to the imperial court in Prague, was instrumental in 1589 in obtaining the privilege of free passage, through the entire Reich, for the citizens of Minden. This was an invaluable service of the Jewish community to the town of Minden, although the Jews themselves do not seem to

have drawn any tangible financial advantages from this deed (p. 99).

The discussion of the daily points of contact between Jews and Christians is on the whole revealing, if somewhat unsystematic. In 1613, the Christian wet-nurse in Susmann Gans's house misused her position to abduct the small child entrusted to her care. When the illegal employment of a Christian nurse by a Jew came to light, because of the ensuing complications, Susmann Gans was jailed for several days and forced to pay a handsome fine of 30 talers. A few years later, the city council itself granted permission to another Jew to employ a Christian wet-nurse (p. 308). Similarly, we hear of a scuffle between drunken Jews and Christians in a roadside inn or of a Jew who issued a "letter of dismissal" to his Christian mistress through a notary because he himself could not write German (p. 310). There were also sporadic incidents of violence, such as stone-throwing against windows in Jewish houses. In these cases the city authorities would impose severe sentences against the offenders, such as an incident in 1623 of banishment from the town for three years (p. 317). Nor were the Jews themselves totally defenseless. Reading the inventory of a Jewish house drawn up by the Minden authorities in December 1613, one is struck by the presence of many weapons, including four pistols and two daggers (p. 300).

The beginning of the sovereignty of Brandenburg-Prussia after the Thirty Years' War did not bring with it any improvement or alleviation of the situation of the Jews in Minden. Far from being characterized by religious tolerance and enlightened benevolence—here Linnemeier takes issue with the interpretation of Selma Stern—the policy of the Prussian kings toward their Jewish subjects was at best motivated by greed. For the next 150 years or so the Jews in Minden were on the whole condemned to a marginalized, backwater existence dominated by oppression, economic extortion and the inability of all but the eldest children to stay in the country of their birth. In the course of time, Minden assumed the role of a *Zwischenstation* for Jews wishing to reach the flourishing coastal towns of northwest Germany: Emden, Hamburg, Altona. Linnemeier views the expulsion of the Jews from the countryside in the years 1714-16 as especially calamitous. The decision to force the Jews out of the countryside was motivated by the Prussian Crown's desire to maximize its profits from the collection of the excise tax in the towns. The move had lasting adverse effects on the composition and economic viability of the Jewish population that were only partially reversed in the era of emancipation. The ultimate upshot was a stunted

population growth. In the more than 200 years between 1599 and 1804 the Jewish population only increased from 135 to 183 persons (p. 520). At the same time, in neighboring Lippe, the Jewish population climbed from 198 persons in 1697 to 1063 in 1807, a fivefold increase in 110 years.[3]

The book is not without its shortcomings. Brevity is not one of the virtues of the author; the main outline of the argument often seems to be obscured by a plethora of minute details and a style apt to be ponderous. A short recapitulation or summary at the end of each chapter, as well as a comprehensive listing of primary and archival sources at the end of the book, are sadly lacking. Disconcerting also are the unnecessarily long citations, given verbatim in the original, unmodernized German spelling of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These failings notwithstanding, Linnemeier's volume, thanks to its solid scholarship and its wide-ranging documentary basis, is an important and welcome contribution to the regional history of the Jews in northeast Westphalia.

Notes

[1]. See Rotraud Ries, *Jüdisches Leben in Niedersachsen im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Hannover: Hahn, 1994); Klaus Pohlmann, *Juden in Lippe in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit: Zwischen Pogrom und Vertreibung, 1350-1614* (Detmold: Gesellschaft für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit, 1995); Jörg

Deventer, *Das Abseits als sicherer Ort? Juedische Minderheit und christliche Gesellschaft im Alten Reich am Beispiel der Fürststube Corvey (1550-1807)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996); and Peter Guttkuhn, *Die Geschichte der Juden in Moising und Lübbecke. Von den Anfängen 1656 bis zur Emanzipation 1852* (Lübbecke: Schmidt-Rohmhild, 1999).

[2]. The inexplicable absence of such standard works as Jacob Katz's *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) or Jonathan I. Israel's *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) from Linnemeier's bibliography is in this respect symptomatic. The pertinent third volume of *Die Landjüdenschaften in Deutschland als Organe jüdischer Selbstverwaltung von der Neuzeit bis ins neunzehnte Jahrhundert: eine Quellensammlung*, edited by the late Daniel J. Cohen (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy of Sciences, 2001), probably came out too late for the author to consult.

[3]. Cf. Michael Guenter, *Die Juden in Lippe von 1648 bis zur Emanzipation 1858* (Detmold: Naturwiss. und Historischer Verein für das Land Lippe, 1973), p. 131; and Klaus Pohlmann, *Die Verbreitung der Handwerke unter den Juden: Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Handwerker in Lippe im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert* (Detmold: Gesellschaft für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit, 1993), p. 147.

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