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Marina Sassenberg. *Selma Stern (1890-1981): Das Eigene in der Geschichte.* London and Tuebingen: Leo Baeck Institute, 2004. 293 pp. EUR 69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-16-148417-9.

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Published on H-German (December, 2007)

Between Self and History: Approaches to a Twentieth-Century Historian

Selma Stern is one of the most recognizable names in the twentieth-century historiography of German Jewry. Her works on Josel of Rosheim, the court Jews, and the Jews in the Prussian state are still cited widely and, even if somewhat dated by now in some aspects, still very valuable. Stern is an intriguing figure, a woman in an academic world dominated by men and a German Jew during a very complicated and traumatic period in Jewish history–World War I, National Socialism, and the Holocaust. Stern married Eugen TÃ¤ubler, the well-known scholar, with whom she fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s and settled in Cincinnati. Later, in a very creative phase of life, Stern was a founding member of the Leo Baeck Institut, which sustained research initiatives and archives in New York, London, and Jerusalem. An extremely prolific scholar and a complex individual, Stern is fertile ground for an examination of the development of German-Jewish life, the historiography of German Jews, as well as the academy and the role of women in the discipline of history and society more generally.

In this smart, provocative book, Marina Sassenberg presents a biography in the broadest and most engaging sense. She reviews Stern's life, but uses its wider context as the background for focusing a lens on Stern's sense of self and work as a historian. In this regard, Sassenberg presents a holistic Stern, whose life is played out in the pages of her historical writings and whose historical investigations helped to shape and make sense of her own life. In her treatment of Stern and her approach to the relationships between self-consciousness, self-discovery, and history, Sassenberg charts important and new–if also complicated and somewhat contentious–ground. Throughout the volume, Sassenberg utilizes a large number of Stern's papers such as personal documents, diary entries, correspondence, and newspaper excerpts. In addition to her formal academic writings, transcriptions are available from her source research on Jews in the Prussian state, as well as materials related to the scholarly review of her work, to which Sassenberg returns frequently and fruitfully in her analysis.

Sassenberg begins the study in earnest with an introduction to recent developments in women's history and Jewish studies, especially in Germany. A central question Sassenberg posits is about the relationship between historians' biographical experiences and their historical research. As she addresses each topic in the book, Sassenberg provides brief but rich contextual information on a variety of historical issues. In the first

of its two major sections, Sassenberg explores Stern's development of self. She traces Stern's youth, emphasizing her relationship with her father and her education. She also assesses Stern's acculturated home life, noting that Stern's mother represents well the dual role of the German-Jewish bourgeoisie of the *Kaiserszeit*: the preservation of tradition and the furthering of acculturation within Christian-secular society. Sassenberg explores Stern's education broadly within the context of the feminist movement, gender roles, and the university environment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout she identifies a certain reserved personality, yet autonomous and pioneering spirit within her subject.

General historical developments as well as Stern's own life experiences affected Stern's sense of self. For example, Stern's commitment to a German national spirit, however strong, was tempered by her awareness of the realities of World War I. Her turn to a more conscious identification with Judaism Sassenberg associates with the growing interwar antisemitism, especially after 1933, when Stern became more directly involved in Jewish organizations. Stern's experiences in America further shaped her identity and scholarship. As Sassenberg points out, Stern's writings after 1945 evince development in two directions: on the one hand, commitment to a German-Jewish past; on the other, a turning to Judaism's religious and traditional values. Despite world events, most noticeably the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, Stern's conception of the Jewish people remained in essence cultural-historical. It remained, at its root, located within the geographical boundaries of Europe and Germany.

Throughout part 1, Sassenberg weaves an intricate and inward-looking picture of Stern's life and individual development, both exploring psychological matters and creating a broader context from consideration of the impact of general historical developments. For Sassenberg, the tensions between, and search for harmonization of, femininity and intellectuality in some ways paralleled the duality of Stern's German-Jewish existence. Here Sassenberg offers an insightful assessment of acculturation generally and Stern's acculturation specifically. Sassenberg is not the only one to have posited a parallel between the feminine and Jewish experiences, each representing less dominant, but centrally engaged, elements in society. In Sassenberg's argument, however, the connection appears tenuous, especially as Sassenberg notes that Stern was little concerned with formal women's movements, and Jewish intellectual culture of the time drew from broader German sources.

In the second part of the book, Sassenberg turns to Stern's historiographical development, or perhaps, more accurately, what Sassenberg describes as her search for self in history. Sassenberg characterizes Stern's historical work as bound by the search for consistency, meaningfulness in history, and a relationship between history and her own life. For Sassenberg, Stern's personal experiences, therefore, serve as the backdrop and key to understanding her historical works.

Sassenberg traces Stern's early interest in the French Revolution and her attempts to balance the focus on utopianism and realism. Until the mid-1920s, Stern was also absorbed by the growing question of the woman as a subject of European historiography. Already in 1914, with an essay on Electress Sophia of Hanover (1630-1714), Stern had begun to trace the life and work of a particular woman with a historical investigation. Stern's writings about women in the second and third decades of the twentieth century betrayed a history of political and social emancipation and acculturation that allowed Stern to further develop her own perspectives. At the same time, this historical focus coincided with increasing involvement of Jewish women in various social movements and women's movements.

Stern's work, *Jud SÃ¼Ã* (1929), which treated the court factor during the period of absolutism, raised significant identity questions for Stern, especially in light of the antisemitic agitations of the 1920s. Indeed, in the same year that the National Socialists came to power, Stern published three essays, the last of which, on the expulsion of the Jews from Vienna, revealed a subtle but significant shift from the concept of diaspora to *galut* (exile). In a similar way, in Stern's *The Spirit Returneth* (1946)– a collection of novellae about the life of a Jewish family during the fourteenth-century plague persecutions– Sassenberg argues that Stern described what she knew from her historical research and from recollections of her own life. In this sense, Sassenberg presents Stern's work in a literary context, with histories having plots and unfolding drama. As Sassenberg argues later, in *The Spirit Returneth* Stern grappled with autobiographical writing after the Holocaust, without utilizing an autobiographical text per se. For Sassenberg, *The Spirit Returneth* served as the mature manifestation of a long process of personal and historical reflection and simultaneously as a longer farewell to the notion of German-Jewish dualism.

With the publication of *The Court Jew* (1950), Stern returned to her old historiographical stomping grounds,

namely the world of Jewish court factors in Germany and Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But her view was now informed by the experiences of the Holocaust and exile. Some of Stern's earlier idealism, in which sensibilities both German and Jewish were combined, had vanished. Stern's next project, the one for which she may still be best known, was devoted to the sixteenth-century *shtadlan* Josel of Rosheim. Some historians and writers had discussed Josel previously, but the sense of him as a self-assertive leader made him a particularly important subject for Stern at that time. The figure was indeed dualistic for her, but in a different sense than she had seen in Jewish history previously. Josel was a Talmud Jew, statesman, mystic, Kabbalist, and educated man of the Renaissance. Here, Sassenberg asserts that Stern not only saw the qualities she wanted in Josel, but that she in fact superimposed her own remembrances of youth and childhood onto her depiction of Josel's youth in Alsace. This proximity or melding of biographer and subject, Sassenberg maintains, was interpreted by many readers and reviewers as a strength, not a liability (a point that Sassenberg herself shares).

But Stern's magnum opus was the seven-volume *Der PreuÃische Staat und die Juden* (1962-71), comprised of some 3,500 pages. It became both a standard work and a valuable source collection for German-Jewish history. This work, Sassenberg argues, perhaps even more than Stern's other works, served as a foil for Stern's search for self in history. Sassenberg details the core theses of the volumes, asserting that the project modified and matured Stern's notion of acculturation. In this regard, Sassenberg is particularly careful to note changes in the foci, themes, and even writing style between volumes, presenting the project as a living organism that helped Stern to work through many issues of both a historical and personal nature.

Throughout part 2, Sassenberg raises a number of significant historiographical challenges. How far should we read history as literature and as the subjective construction of the historian? While most of us recognize today that the historian crafts historiography based on personal experiences, interests, and questions, many will find the assertion uncomfortable that history is a form of personal therapy. In fact, Sassenberg evaluates Stern's scholarship based on her use of sources only infrequently. We do not often get a sense that Stern's practice of history had the potential to be an objective enterprise in which conclusions might be dictated by findings in archives or the relationship of various historical incidents. For some, then, the connection between outline of self and history at the heart of the book will at times seem tenuous and uneasy. On the other hand, as we have learned repeatedly, the lenses with which historians read the past, the very questions that historians ask, are colored by their experiences and worldviews, even if such orientations are not consciously set forth.

The volume contains a brief but summative conclusion and a chronology of key dates in Stern's life. It also includes an excellent bibliography that provides information on Stern's publications, reviews of Stern's works, primary sources, and secondary literature both about Stern and various related historical topics. It is quite unfortunate, however, that the book contains no index. Overall, this book provides historiographical challenges, all the while presenting a nuanced and engaging account of a historian who was important for her scholarship, her grappling with German-Jewish identity, and her pioneering work as a woman in the academy of the twentieth century.

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Citation: Dean Phillip Bell. Review of Sassenberg, Marina, *Selma Stern (1890-1981): Das Eigene in der Geschichte.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2007.

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