

The Butchers Tale: A Manifestation of Latent Anti-Semitism

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The Butcher's Tale written by Helmut Walser Smith is an examination of a legal case which occurred on March 11th, 1900. The grisly case serves as a grim and poignant foreshadowing for the events that would take place during the first and second world wars. Ernst Winter, a young Christian student, is murdered, dismembered, and his remains are spread out across the setting of our story, Konitz, Germany. Smith uses the story of Winter to punctuate what he believes to be the historical process of anti-Semitism, in which seemingly casual conflicts which one might overlook turn into unfounded accusations and violence. Konitz, in 1900, would have seemed like an unusual setting for anti-Semitic crime, but the ebbing rise of prejudice in Germany during the 19th century served to fortify the ideologies which disseminated through the people of this town. Further, anti-Semitic prejudice would not so much rise steadily as it would lay dormant in those of the Christian faith; dormant until it would eventually be required to justify their emotions. This idea is the crux of Smith's 'historical process' argument, it is "...what makes latent anti-Semitism manifest, transforming private enmity and neighborly disputes into the blood-stained canvases of persecutory landscapes."

Smith outlines the changing political topology of 19th century Germany, "By the general election of 1898, what had seemed like a rising tide of anti-Semitic politics had already begun to ebb. The anti-Semitic parties lost six of their sixteen districts and, though their vote total increased slightly, their lack of progress over the last five years boded ill for the future" (Smith, 39). Two years prior to Winter's murder and the subsequent trials it would have seemed that anti-Semitism had begun to decline. The shifting tide of prejudice ideology is evidence that these crimes were not carried by the waves of anti-Semitic policies. Smith writes that, "political anti-Semitism had already ebbed, and other kinds of anti-Semitism were increasingly confined to the estuaries of social snobbery and backwaters of the ideological fringe" (21). Moreover, the

question of why the murder resulted in accusations towards the Jewish community cannot be attributed to a rise of anti-Semitism. Smith argues it is the historical process by which these accusations found footing.

Following the murder there were no potential leads, however, as word spread of Winter's demise accusations towards the Jewish community would begin to synthesize. Here, the beginnings of the historical process are outlined, "The accusations hurled by neighbors against neighbor centered on an elaborate story, the butcher's tale, which drew from the ancient blood libel: that every year at Passover, Jews ritually slaughtered Christian children..." (18). With ancient fables as their kindling, the people of Konitz turned on their neighbors, the Jews, with whom they had no previous quarrels. These Christian ideologies, even though founded ten centuries prior – according to Smith – burrowed their way into the 19th century. And, when the people of Konitz are presented with unresolved calamity, seeking to find closure, they placed blame on the Jews. The first of the tenuous accusations would be hurled towards Wolf Israelski, "They incarcerated [Israelski] ... For the excited crowds throughout the region looking for someone to punish, all of this ... would suffice. They now took matters into their own hands and went after the Jews" (31). To the Jewish community this seemed unwarranted, given that anti-Semitism did not appear to be gaining momentum at the time. In addition to this, Smith elaborates, "With the founding of the Second German Empire in 1871, the Jews of Germany had attained full emancipation, and, although discrimination did not thereafter cease, they nevertheless achieved striking success in a country governed by the rule of law" (31). Again, it is the case that the historical process by which anti-Semitism materializes does not require political policies as a foundation, it is the culmination of economic stress, religious ideology, and

geographic positioning that creates a fever pitch. Furthermore, it would not be until the interwar period in Germany that politics would invoke ideas of anti-Semitism as a platform.

A Berlin inspector had arrived in Konitz to extrapolate the details of the grim case, and potentially identify a compelling suspect. His initial suspicion would lead him to the questioning of a Christian butcher, Gustav Hoffmann. Hoffmann, a known anti-Semite, was disgusted by the fact that a Berlin inspector would believe a Christian to be guilty rather than a Jew. According to the butcher, “The Jews need a Christian butcher on whom to pin their own guilt...adding that he was disappointed in the Berlin Inspectors for their inability to see through this Jewish machination” (61). This anti-Semitic view, founded in Christian thought, would compel Hoffmann to create the *Butcher’s Tale* – Smith notes that it is possible the work was created by anti-Semitic journalist Wilhelm Bruhn – a document that outlines both why he himself could not have committed the crime, and twelve reasons why he is certain that a Jew is guilty. This single piece of literature created an undertow, dragging all fellow Christians into the theological arena, “the butcher’s tale...was published both in the newspapers and as a pamphlet with a print run of 50,000 copies, making it perhaps the most widely read piece of writing in all of West Prussia that summer” (66). The butcher’s tale would awaken anti-Semitic ideologies in most Christians in Konitz and surrounding rural areas, and with this, unfounded and prejudiced accusations would begin to materialize. Finally, the historical process has evolved from its infancy to become a mass hysteria, turning neighbor against neighbor. According to Smith, after the second surge of riots the case did not smolder, “rather the trial became a spectacle of the first order, a farce in which witness after witness recounted stories incriminating the Lewys and other Jews...” (75). Thus, the historical process has come to its inevitable conclusion; Hoffmann had turned against

his neighbor, and fellow butcher, and in his conviction would also invite others sharing his religious beliefs to remain in step.

The Butcher's Tale outlines the tragic case of a young Christian boy, Ernst Winter. The Author, Helmut Wesler Smith, uses this case to highlight the historical process in which prejudices long founded in religious history burrow, only to emerge later under extenuating circumstances. When rumours spread of the murder it was not long before the Jewish community in Konitz, Germany would come under attack. First, the initial arrest of Wolf Israelski, a Jewish tanner, however this would not suffice. Following his accusation, Gustav Hoffmann, a Christian Butcher, produced the officially titled "Petition of the Konitz Butcher Gustav Hoffmann Pertaining to the Matter of Winter's Murder," and its central argument is that the Jews are responsible for the heinous crime, citing ancient blood libels. This single piece of media disseminated throughout Konitz and surrounding areas, inciting violence and mistrust towards the Jewish community. Following the publication of this work, a series of unfounded, anti-Semitic accusations would be hurled towards the Jews, turning neighbor against neighbor. These events however cannot be attributed to a meteoric, and sudden rise in anti-Semitic ideology. In fact, the governing body elected to power in 1871 had emancipated the Jews, affording them civil rights protected by law. Smith argues that it is the historical process, the awakening of embedded prejudices, which caused these crimes against the Jewish community. In Konitz, ancient Christian theology fueled this process, creating an atmosphere of injustice.