

# Plea for tolerance — Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *The Jewess of Toledo*

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Literature is a form of responsibility – for literature itself and for society. ... Anyone who tells a story says, this is now right, and reduces the fullness and simultaneity of everything to something linear, to a path<sup>1</sup>.

Stimulated by a visit to Spain in 1926, Lion Feuchtwanger discovered in Toledo in a chronicle by Alfonso the Wise, the *Cronica general* from 1284, the fascinating love story between Alfonso's great-grandfather, Alfonso VIII of Castile, and the beautiful, educated Jewess of Toledo, Raquel, called "La Ferosa", "the beauty". In the course of the centuries, this historical background becomes the foundation for various literary adaptations, most well-known *La Jerulasen conquistada* from 1609 and *Las paces de los reyes y judía de Toledo* from 1616, two works by Lope de Vega, as well as the Jewess of Toledo from 1873 by Franz Grillparzer. The dramatic events of the following years, the rise to power of Hitler, war and exile, allowed Feuchtwanger to make his own adaptation only in 1954/55.

The novel begins with a description of the situation in Spain of the twelfth century, eighty years after the death of the Prophet, when the Muslims have built up a large empire with a superior culture and flourishing cities. The capital of the Occident is Córdoba. At that time, Spain is being shaken by numerous struggles, crusades and pogroms, a complex historical situation which, in his novel, Feuchtwanger reduces and fictionally intensifies. One part of the Christian Visigoths is still in the north of Spain. The Pope has declared a crusade in which Islam is to be driven out of the countries which it has taken from the Christians. The Muslims, who at that time were refined, could not withstand the wildness of the Christians. Many Jews emigrate. Some remain in Spain and convert to Islam, for instance, the rich Jewish merchant, Jehuda Ibn Esra, who lives with his daughter in Toledo, and who, since the Christians need the money and the expertise of the Jews, becomes the finance minister of the Christian ruler of Castile, Alfonso VIII, and purchases from him the Castillo del Castro. Alfonso has been locked in a permanent feud with the Castros for many years.

Even though the title of the novel is *The Jewess of Toledo*, Raquel is by no means the novel's protagonist but is surrounded by other equally important main figures such as Alfonso, Leonor, his rightful spouse, Don Rodrique, the archbishop's adviser, and Musa Ibn Da'ud, Jehuda's doctor and librarian who, although of the Muslim faith, calls himself a believer of all three religions.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 30 December 2004.

In the description of his activities, behaviour and views, Musa becomes, so to speak, one of Lessing's protagonists very well known from literature. He reminds us of "Nathan the Wise"<sup>2</sup>. In Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, Nathan is enticed by the Caliph into a trap. He is supposed to explain to him which religion is the true one. Nathan answers him with the parable of the ring in which tolerance is demonstrated. But Nathan does not go as far as trying to relativize all three religions like Musa does in "The Jewess of Toledo". "I don't make much difference between the three prophets. ... Moses means as much to me as Christ and Christ as much as Mohammed"<sup>3</sup>, and later on, "I am a believer of the three religions. ... Each one has its good points and each one teaches things which reason resists believing"<sup>4</sup>. Nathan's tolerance does not allow any merging of the three religions, whereas Feuchtwanger's "Jewess of Toledo" in the figure of Musa allows everything to appear as one.

On the pragmatic level in dealing with people, Musa and Nathan agree. They entertain relations with people of all three religions and exercise compassion and empathy vis-à-vis those who have gotten into trouble. Nathan takes in the daughter of the deceased crusader and allows her to be educated like his own daughter. Nathan, however, is a merchant, Musa a librarian.

A further main protagonist is Raquel's father, Don Jehuda. Earlier, after the victory of the Muslims over the Christians, and abandoned by his parents, Jehuda was brought up as a Muslim and became friends with the son of the Caliph. He has grown up in the Muslim tradition, language, religion, art and culture, but in his heart he has always remained true to the Jewish religion. This has also favoured his successful advancement with the Caliph, who knows about Jehuda's double religious commitment and tolerates it. Through the offer of becoming Alfonso's finance minister, Jehuda takes advantage of the opportunity of making his experiences available to both sides whilst at the same time furthering his own interests. In this way he can influence both of the warring parties in favour of a long period of peace, the promotion of the general well-being and the reconstruction of stable economic and cultural conditions.

Initially Jehuda had hesitated to take on this position because he also realized the dangers of this mission. Finally, however, the decisive factor for him was not only the augmentation of Castile's wealth, but the possibility of protecting the Jewish community in Toledo from further persecution. Furthermore, he promotes the cause of the Frankish Jewish refugees fleeing from persecution in their own country so that they can settle in Castile.

To start with, all his aims are fulfilled and are strengthened even more by the love relationship between his daughter, Raquel, and Alfonso, which he does nothing to prevent. The contact between Alfonso and Raquel came about through an invitation from Leonor, Alfonso's rightful spouse, to their official residence, Burgos, where the future son-in-law, Don Pedro, is to be dubbed knight. Jehuda and his two children – his son, Alazar, and his daughter, Raquel – are also invited. Alazar is later called by Alfonso to be a page at his court and, after some time, converts there to Christianity.

Alfonso and Leonor are struck by Raquel's unconstrained and open nature. And even though Raquel seems to be somewhat forward and criticizes Alfonso's raw, formidable castle, she nevertheless excites Alfonso's secret interest and pleasure. He wants to see her again and disguises his intention in a request to help him with the restoration of his summer residence La Galiana near Toledo. Raquel sees through this obvious ploy and is offended. But Alfonso does not give up.

In a sophisticated move, he first gives the castle to Jehuda and, when he refuses, because he already has his own Castillo, to Raquel.

Please understand me, I want your daughter to live here. ... Sic volo<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fawzi Boubia 'Die Ringparabel im Exil: Judentum, Christentum und Islam bei Lion Feuchtwanger' in *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* Series A, Conference Reports, Vol. 61, Berlin, New York, Vienna 2003 pp. 337-341.

<sup>3</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger *Die Jüdin von Toledo* Berlin 1955, 6th printing p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 163.

Later on, Jehuda asks Raquel what she thinks of Alfonso as a man, and to his surprise she says: “I am not averse to this king, my father”<sup>6</sup>.

However, she asks for a further wish to be fulfilled:

Then I desire (said Raquel) that before I go to La Galiana, inscriptions should be made on the walls which remind me in good time of what is right, and I request you, my father, to choose the inscriptions<sup>7</sup>.

At La Galiana, an intimate cohabitation develops between Alfonso and Raquel. Bound to each other in passionate sensuousness, they also have a great joy in talking to each other.

They chatted excitedly. She had to explain and tell; so much of what affected her was strange to him and he wanted to know everything, and he understood her whether she spoke Arabian, Latin or Castilian. And new things continued to occur to him, too, which surely interested her and which he had to tell her straightaway. Every word which one of them said was important, even though it sounded so insignificant and playful, and if they were alone, each recollected the words of the other and thought about them and smiled. It was marvellous to understand each other so well even though each was so different from the other. In their innermost feelings they were the same; each felt precisely what the other was feeling – a boundless happiness.

Oh, the bliss when they merged into one another<sup>8</sup>.

Raquel showed her classical education. Alfonso was amazed, but he understood her also without words. Their happiness lasts a long time, seven years, and it is so intense that he forgets his official business.

Everyone felt it – that he was neglecting his duties as knight and king, that he had succumbed to her charms, just like the ancient heroes, Hercules and Antonius, had done, and also the Hebrew knight Samson with his Delilah<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the great harmony, a latent flaw remains in their relationship. When Alfonso asks her about an inscription in her house she translates:

An ounce of peace is worth more than an ounce of victory<sup>10</sup>.

But Alfonso calls this nonsense. That, he says, is something for peasants and burghers, but not for knights. Raquel, however, remains monosyllabic (eloquently silent) throughout this evening. All her attempts to turn this knight into a human being have failed. But she loved also the knight. Fascinated by the powerful man, Raquel wanted also the ‘ennoblement’ of the knight through lived humanity, the sensitive and receptive knight.

Despite Jehuda’s attempts to hold him back from his numerous military campaigns – crusades, strife with the Castros, conflict with the empire of Aragon – he remains in his heart a knight and fighter. His wife, Leonor, plays a great role in this. He calls on her in Burgos every now and then to seek her advice.

Regarding power he is close to his wife, but in love he belongs to Raquel. Leonor tries, of course, to destroy the relationship between Raquel and Alfonso. Clever as she is, she does not address

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 180.

the relationship with Raquel directly, but makes a claim on his obligations as the commander of the army and the protector of the Christian Occident. But finally she drives him into further military adventures that end in chaos which even Jehuda cannot prevent.

Jehuda's visions and wishes shatter in the end. But that this had already begun earlier through him demonstrating his position, power and wealth patronizingly before Don Ephraim, the head of the Jewish community, and not only before him, but also before others. This brings him certain disadvantages such as the engendering of envy against him as a successful man and ultimately the destruction of his and Raquel's existence.

Leonor's plotting and scheming seems to work. Alfonso loses the Battle of Alarcos against the Muslims. And Leonor makes Jehuda responsible for the defeat, well knowing that she was the one who had urged her husband into battle. With an intentional intrigue, she believes she has the right to call someone the guilty party.

She travels to Toledo and allows her scheme to unfold freely. With some finesse, she incites the head of the Jewish community, Don Ephraim, who is now also a relative of the Castros, in whose earlier possession Jehuda has now also set himself up, and allows him to believe that Jehuda is really the guilty one. The mob storms the castle.

It must away, that there! It must be dead! It must lie in the ruins, all that fine, opulent, Jewish, feminine, heathen stuff!<sup>11</sup>.

Meanwhile, Raquel is waiting with her father for the return of Don Alfonso, which had been his last wish before the battle. Raquel and Jehuda are murdered by the incensed mob.

Alfonso finally returns from the lost battle and stands before the destroyed La Galiana. Shaken by the death of Raquel and Jehuda, he recognizes his wife, Leonor, as the one who has instigated all this unhappiness, and turns away from her forever.

From then on he renounces all knighthood. Through the death of Raquel and Jehuda, he has understood something of his senseless longing for heroism.

I have calmed down. I am free of violent cravings. I have become a better king. I should be satisfied, but I am not!<sup>12</sup>.

He commissions Don Ephraim to negotiate peace. He is to conclude a twelve-year truce with the Caliph.

Alfonso arranges a dignified burial for Raquel and Jehuda. After they had been buried in a shallow grave after the murder, their corpses are now exhumed, and a long funeral procession, at Alfonso's behest with the participation of the town's inhabitants, passes through the streets of Toledo. They are buried in the Juderia, the old, distinguished Jewish cemetery.

The only visionary stance remaining for Alfonso is that, despite his urging her to a Christian baptism, Raquel had remained true to her Jewish faith. But the whereabouts of the son born of the love between Alfonso and Raquel, whom, with Raquel's knowledge, Jehuda had removed to an unknown place before the war, to protect him from being baptized a Christian by Alfonso, remain a secret.

Initially, Lion Feuchtwanger tried to retell the biblical story of Esther for our times. In doing so, he hoped to shed light and meaning on the darkness of our times. In the end, however, he tried to realize the theme in the story of Raquel and Alfonso. Spain in the twelfth century as a theatre of struggles and religious conflicts seems to him to be the appropriate setting.

Feuchtwanger was concerned to connect the historical novel to the present time. Affected by the situation in Palestine, particularly in 1948 after the founding of the independent state of Israel, initially he was convinced that this was not sensible. But after his exile, and after his personal experiences in Germany and France, he made a speech at the New York World Exposition on 22 October 1940, shortly after his arrival in America, in which he supported the setting up of a Jewish state.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 428.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p. 498.

Over the years Feuchtwanger modified his concept of the historical novel. Although his core thesis is maintained that history through fictionalization enables greater identification of the reader because of the dramaticization. The reader's interest is reinforced by the sensuously experienced description of the experiences of the authorial narrator. Through the fictionalization, the reader's illusion is enhanced which in any case is more lively, richer and more colourful than concrete everyday reality. By clothing a contemporary content in an historical costume, the option of a distancing and thus of observing without fear as well as a change of perspective is opened up. This alienation is conceived by Feuchtwanger as an intensification of interest and attentiveness. He even goes so far as to believe, like Brecht, that this kind of alienation drives the reader into self-reflection<sup>13</sup>. The difficulty of transposing historical themes into the present to find answers to questions in our own times was recognized by no less a writer than Lion Feuchtwanger in his novels, *The Jewess of Toledo* from 1955 and *Jefia and His Daughter* from 1957. Through the modern mass media of our own day, this literary view of history has receded somewhat into the background.

Despite the detailed historical descriptions, the novel also has fairy-tale characteristics regarding the description of beauties, of an ideal state in which all three religions productively and beneficially interact and transform each other under the leadership of a Muslim world empire in which art, science and architecture achieve their full flowering. There are large interconnections between the times, but only with respect to the framework plot.

The original title of the novel was *Spanish Ballad*. On the level of depth psychology he shows a varying process between doing and not doing, between taking an initiative and passively letting things happen. All the main figures come up against the limits of their life projects.

The rich merchant, Jehuda, fails with his concept for peace and reason, loses his son to Christianity, his daughter, Raquel, to King Alfonso of Castile, and finally he is punished with death by the crowd that has been incited by Leonor.

Raquel falls in love with the caring, but politically short-sighted Alfonso. In the beginning she still believes in being able to humanize him, among other things, through the inscriptions which she has made on the walls of her house; in the end she has to see that he remains true to his old doctrine and even wants to convert her to Christianity. However, to avoid falling prey to any weakness, she sacrifices her son by allowing him to be sent to a secret place, thus ensuring that the faith of her fathers is preserved.

Before the birth, Raquel believed she was bearing the Messiah – knowledge that had been passed on to her by her father, that she was a descendant of King David.

Raquel's very strange fate made her believe that she was bearing the Messiah. He was supposed to come from the house of David, and was she not, the Ibn Esra, a princess from the house of David? And the great, dangerous happiness that the Christian King had chosen her to be his companion, did that not point to a quite extraordinary destiny? She palpated her body, listened inwardly to herself; she smiled deeply, and her belief became firmer and firmer that she was bearing the Prince of Peace, the Messiah. But she did not speak with anyone about it. ... In La Galiana in the meantime, Dona Raquel looked at and tenderly touched her son. Quietly she flattered him and caressed him and called him Immanuel, the name of the Messiah<sup>14</sup>.

The tradition of the lineage ends with the death of the last two faithful of the family Ibn Esra.

Alfonso represents the Christian ideal of the period, the knight who is supposed to defend the Christians of Jerusalem against the Muslims. Even though Alfonso is convinced of his ideal of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lion Feuchtwanger 'Vom Sinn und Unsinn des historischen Romans' *Centum Opuscula*, Rudolstadt 1956, first published 1935 pp. 508-515 and Mattias Johannes Fischer 'Aspekte einer fragmentarischen Theorie des historischen Romans bei Feuchtwanger' in *Text und Kritik* No. 79/80 Munich 1983 pp. 19-27.

<sup>14</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger *Die Jüdin von Toledo* Berlin 1955 pp. 295 and 307.

knighthood, nevertheless he can allow himself to enter the free-floating conversations with Raquel at La Galiana. These associative dialogues, viewed psychoanalytically, are, so to speak, reinforced by the rules of the inscriptions in the house and welded together into a working alliance.

Through Alfonso's super-ego structures becoming loosened up by libido, he can develop a temporary free space for experimental behaviour and an opening for a critical questioning of norms and commandments. Only through a renewed relapse into warring conflicts (recollection – repetition – working through / Freud) and through being shaken by the death of Raquel and Jehuda, can he recognize his false destructive ideals through the process of mourning these losses.

The secret of the son of Alfonso and Raquel, the possible Prophet Messiah, remains postponed to the future as a mission. Here Feuchtwanger shows a dialectically ongoing process of knowledge in the story which follows the principle of hope.

The entire novel is dominated by a father-daughter motif. The Oedipal dependency between father and daughter cannot be solved by triangulation on the part of the father. The tragic symbiosis ends finally in death and can only be resolved psychodynamically in the following generation by Raquel's son as a legacy: the clarification of conflicts of loyalty and the reconciliation of the various life-accounts.