

Digression III

The Destruction of Jerusalem and the First World War: Krane

Though strictly speaking beyond the remit of this study, if only just, I nevertheless would like to mention a novella by Anna Freiin von Krane (1853–1937). *Das Siegesfest der sechsten Legion* (The Victory Celebration of the Sixth Legion) appeared first in 1910 in *Das Licht und die Finsternis*,¹ a collection of stories about the life of Jesus, and was reprinted after the outbreak of the First World War in 1915 in the series *In der Feuerpause: Ernste und heitere Erzählungen unserer Feldgrauen gewidmet* (During Lulls in Hostilities: Serious and Serene Tales, Dedicated to Our Field Grey [Soldiers]),² issued by the Catholic publishing house of J. P. Bachem in Cologne, which ten years earlier had also published Adam Josef Cüppers's *Hanani*, which will be discussed in chapter IV. Krane's short text, overlooked by Anderson,³ is among the plethora of literary engagements with the legend of Ahasuerus. It is of particular interest here not only because it offers an intriguing description of the fighting in the burning Temple but also because of its later publication context during the First World War.

The novella's plot is quickly summarized: It is ten years after the destruction of Jerusalem when the Sixth Legion, at the time heavily involved in the fighting, celebrates in its current garrison by the River Rhine in the German province the anniversary of its victory. War tales are being told, among them also one about the unnerving appearance of an unarmed Jew whom it was impossible to kill, though he clearly sought his own death—but even the raging flames consuming the Temple would recede when he approached. Drawn to the celebrations in the garrison, the uncanny figure of an old man passes by the dazed guards—moving slowly, bowed down, and as pale as a corpse but with a strange fire in his eyes. At the celebrations, the wife of the commanding officer has her young Jewish slave dress up in his native costume and entertain the officers with his songs. When her husband demands the slave sing “that song about the rivers of Babylon,”

¹ Anna Freiin von Krane, *Das Licht und die Finsternis* (Cologne: Bachem, 1910).

² Other titles by Krane in the same series included its first three volumes: *Der Träumer von Nazareth* (1915), *Das Gastmahl der Sünder* (1915), and *Der Zöllner: Erzählung aus der Zeit Christi* (1915). The series otherwise comprised among others a sequence of stories from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 (volumes 17–21: Heinrich von Steinaecker, *Erinnerungen an den deutsch-französischen Krieg 1870–1871*) and a number of stories by Gerhard Hennes which included also, as volume 13, a folkloristic tale in the vernacular of Cologne, *Ne kölsche Kreger* (1915).

³ See Anderson, *Wandering Jew*.

Juda's performance, inspired by the words of Psalm 137, turns into a "cry for revenge that rose to heaven from a chest wounded to the death!"⁴ The young Jew's audience inadvertently realize that "something inimical" has happened: "A people trampled to the ground had cried out! A curse had been uttered that shrilled piercingly and menacingly into the joy of victory!"⁵

When Juda is condemned to death for his presumption by his furious master, Ahasuerus shows himself and points with bony fingers at the Roman. He then vanishes and Juda is promised his life if he brings the old man back. Led back to the celebration by Juda, the old Jew tells his story and explains the nature of the curse under which he labors. In an intriguing twist to the legend, Ahasuerus cannot remember the name of the god he offended. He feels that only if he remembers shall he find his rest and so, when he senses that the name has been uttered by one of the soldiers in the garrison he sets forth to seek him out, with the officers and their wives in his wake. Eventually he confronts the Christian soldier and, being told the name of Jesus Christ, his memory returns. Yet with it does not come redemption and his pleas to the soldier to kill him are futile as the other realizes that he could indeed strike the old man down but that doing so would mean to interfere with divine providence.

Overall, Krane's representation of the Jewish characters in her novella is sympathetic. Juda is a beautiful and imposing figure whose love for his blind mother and pain at the fate of his people evoke pity and even sympathy while his pride and fortitude invite admiration. His performance of the psalms has a spell-binding effect on the Romans who appreciate their poetic and musical beauty and are impressed by his noble appearance.⁶ Yet the evocation of the glorious Jewish past, lost with the destruction of Jerusalem, in the last instance serves more specifically to emphasize the abject situation of the Jews in captivity. Juda is paraded like the natives in one of the ethnographic shows so popular in the nineteenth century.⁷ Yet what starts out as a mockery turns into a frightening reassertion of the young Jew's true identity.

Juda is identified as the grandson of the High Priest Caiaphas who, as Ahasuerus claims, is a thousand times more guilty than he is, for sentencing Jesus to

⁴ Anna Freiin von Krane, *Das Siegesfest der sechsten Legion* (Cologne: Bachem, [1915]), p. 16: "den Gesang von den Flüssen Babylons. [...] ein Racheschrei, der aus todverwundeter Brust zum Himmel drang!"

⁵ Ibid., p. 17: "etwas Feindliches [war] geschehen. Ein zu Boden getretenes Geschlecht hatte aufgeschrien! Ein Fluch war ausgesprochen worden, der grell und drohend in die Siegesfreude hineinschrielt!"

⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 15, 26.

⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 14.

death. Realization begins to dawn on Juda; he begins to internalize the causal relationship between the crucifixion and the dominant traumatic experience of his own childhood, the destruction of Jerusalem.

While Ahasuerus in the end is condemned to continue his wanderings, “burdened with the curse of the divinity and pursued by the hate of all nations,”⁸ Juda is set by him on the path to conversion. Ahasuerus beseeches him: “O Juda ben Caiaphas, thou too art cursed, but thou art innocent. Therefore seek to know Him whom thy father [sic] sentenced to death.”⁹ The passage is interesting in particular because, like Anton de Waal’s *Juda’s Ende*, discussed in chapter IV, it appears to negate the blood curse as recorded in Matthew 27:25, which has been linked to the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁰ It claims the innocence of the descendants of the guilty generation and it is this very innocence too that makes the young Jew respond: “I shall do it, so help me God!”¹¹

Ultimately, Krane’s novella reasserts in this manner the bifurcation of models of Jewish existence in the modern world: to convert and thus to build on the glory of the Jewish heritage by overcoming it or, like Ahasuerus, to wander beyond redemption and beyond humanity, a frightful shadow to whom are denied any human emotions and who is cast out from any community.¹² Though not gendered as expected in this instance, Jewish redeemability is once more determined by age. The suggestion is, therefore, that also the contemporary young and open-minded generation of Jews has the potential to convert while the narrative at the same time offers Jewish achievements shared by Christians as a means of avowing the Jewish past.

An intriguing detail is that when Ahasuerus describes the time of the siege of Jerusalem he not only attributes this to the curse placed on him taking effect but notes how all his family fell victim to hunger, illness, hostile missiles, and the marauding gangs of the Jewish factions in the city. He recounts how he himself was cruelly abused and left for dead by the robbers. In contrast to Croly’s *Salathiel*, Krane’s Ahasuerus does not join the fight against the Romans as a combatant

⁸ Ibid., p. 36: “Beladen mit dem Fluche der Gottheit und verfolgt von dem Haß aller Völker.”

⁹ Ibid., p. 34: “O Juda ben Kaiphas, auch auf dir liegt der Fluch, doch du bist schuldlos daran. Darum suche, daß du den kennen lernst, den dein Vater [sic] zum Tode verurteilte.”

¹⁰ It has been suggested that the passage, which does not occur in the other synoptic gospels nor in the gospel of John, is a redactional fiction of the author of the gospel of Matthew that reflects on the historical destruction of Jerusalem, see Ulrich Luz, “Fiktivität und Traditionstreue im Matthäusevangelium im Lichte griechischer Literatur,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche* 84.3–4 (1993): 153–77.

¹¹ Krane, *Siegesfest*, p. 34: “Ich werde es tun, so helfe mir der Herr!”

¹² See ibid.: “Menschlich empfinden kann ich nicht mehr!”

much less as a military leader. His sole motive is to find his death. His purpose is no longer political but intensely subjective: to alleviate his suffering.

Krane's novella, as indicated before, was addressed to German soldiers in the First World War. Series like the one distributed by the publishing house of J. P. Bachem offered a cheap way of taking the soldiers' minds off the fighting during brief moments of a lull in the hostilities. They also offered a vehicle for indoctrination and the boosting of morale. As such the story of Ahasuerus and the destruction of Jerusalem appears a strange thematic choice. There are no obvious identification figures in the story, apart perhaps from a number of Teutonic legionnaires who are mentioned along the way. While the Romans are sketched as efficient soldiers, their commanding officer emerges as verbose and whimsical and his wife as a would-be socialite and domestic harridan. Juda, though imposing, pious, and noble, and of an age that would be shared by many of the conscripted soldiers targeted by the series, remains—at least biologically, i.e., in contemporary antisemitic discourse, racially—a Jew. His envisioned conversion is, moreover, built on the ruins of his nation after a cruel and protracted war of which the scenes of fighting in the Temple sketch a gory image with the bodies of the fallen piling up high and the destruction of everything he held dear complete. Nor is the uncanny figure of the Wandering Jew any more reassuring, his fate a horror and a supposedly just punishment.

The story's geographical setting, in what was later to become the city of Neuss, fosters a tenuous proximity to the established readership of the Cologne publishing house. This catered predominantly for the Catholic archdiocese of the city, which encompassed also the city of Neuss. In this sense the notion of the Rhineland occupied by the Roman legions might be considered to spark patriotic feelings, perhaps associating the French occupation during the Napoleonic Wars. Even so, the identification potential of the oppressed Jews of the first century CE for contemporary Germans would seem far-fetched. Any such suggestions remain rather vague so that in the end the Christian message, originally intended by Krane, known as the “German poet of Christ,”¹³ appears to be central to the text.

13 R. S. Elmar, “Weihnachtsbücherschau. I,” *Volkswohl: Christlich-soziale Monatsschrift* 11 (1920): 384–90, 384: “Deutsche Christusdichterin.”