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KRAUSS' WIENER GESERAH¹

THIS volume will be welcomed as another notable contribution to Jewish history from the pen of Samuel Krauss. Though narrower in scope than his recent Byzantine-Jewish historical studies, this book, like the former, is noted for the manner in which the rabbinic erudition of the author is applied to historical investigation, and particularly for its complete utilization of the rabbinic responsa.

The motive of the book is noteworthy. For the volume was conceived and written by the author as a semi-millennial memorial to the Jewish martyrs of Vienna, who five hundred years ago, in 1420-21, suffered expulsion and were burned at the stake by the decree, or *Geserah*, of Duke Albert of Austria. This tragic theme is rendered doubly sad as the author is visibly weighed down by the contemporary sufferings of his people in the same territory during the present world distress which is felt so acutely in the one-time gay capital of Austria. Even the exterior of the work, its wretched paper, the want of illustrations in a subject that should properly be replete with illustrations, and its generally unattractive outer form betray the want and poverty of the conditions under which the author labored, as he frankly states in his melancholy preface.

These external wants are felt the less, however, as the book, despite its memorial character, was not intended to suit the popular taste. The serious historical student is more than compensated by the wide range of the book, and by the abundance of detailed facts which render it a mine of information relating to the men of letters and the social and intellectual life of Austrian Jewish communities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. And though the matter is at times diffuse, and some of the facts are not always relevant to the main theme, they will also be gratefully received by the investigator if only as gratuitous gifts.

For the contents of the book are not narrowly limited to the *Geserah*, or edict of expulsion, as the title would seem to indicate. The vol-

¹ *Die Wiener Geserah vom Jahre 1421*. Von SAMUEL KRAUSS. Wien und Leipzig. WILHELM BRAUMUELLER, 1920. PP. XII. 264.

ume may be aptly described as a study of the political life, the social conditions, and the literary figures of Austrian Jewry in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The technical aspects of the communal organization of the Jews in Vienna and the surrounding cities, the economic hardships and restrictions under which Jewish artisans and merchants were compelled to labor, the arbitrary tyranny of the outer government, which was combined with a measure of real inner autonomy, the staggering burden of taxes, levies, and imposts of every description, and the problems related to their collection and administration, all these subjects are comprehended, and treated unevenly, it must be confessed, with numerous digressions on incidental themes.

The latter indeed are striking in their variety. They cover, for instance, minor biographical notes about the leading rabbis of the times or topographical details about Vienna and the neighboring cities, or curious oddities concerning Jewish names. Sometimes, however, as under the subject of conflagrations, they bring to light vital facts, which lay bare the tragedy of mediaeval Jewry, reproducing the cloud of suspicion, and the vindictive hatred of the populace, which reduced the Jews to a state of helplessness, bordering on fatalism.

It would indeed appear as if all the sinister forces of mediaevalism conspired in the early fifteenth century to bring about the final catastrophe; and to the chief of these elements Krauss devotes a learned chapter. Thus the author is led to treat of the Hussite wars in their relation to the Jews, who were wantonly accused of complicity with the Hussite enemy at whose very hands the Jews were suffering torture. The chapters on the desecration of the host and the blood accusation, which also are treated in relation to the Geserah, form interesting contributions to the study of these mental aberrations of Mediaeval Christendom.

Dr. Krauss has therefore added to his works an important historical monograph of varied interest. The wide compass of the book, however, is also its essential weakness; for the treatment becomes inevitably diffuse. There is a lack of definiteness felt throughout the work, and strange to say, it is most pronounced in the treatment of the rabbis and the rabbinate. One looks in vain for a serious, well-balanced appreciation of either the learning, the works, or the personalities, of the great rabbis of the time. As to the institution of the Bet-Din, which was of

focal importance in mediaeval Jewry, it is almost entirely overlooked. These shortcomings, however, while serious, cannot blur the positive merits of the book, which is an important contribution to Jewish, as well as general Mediaeval history. It is fair to state that the work is not only worthy of the great scholarship of the author; it is, above all, a beautifully pious tribute to the memory of Jewish martyrdom.

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