

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I’m Mark Oppenheimer. I’m the director of open learning at American Jewish University, and I’ve spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI’s archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI presents...a flame war from the sixteenth century.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): In the LBI archive, there is a very old book. It’s small and light. The paper is yellowed, but soft and thick, almost like fabric. And the title page features a faded woodcut print of a pair of eyeglasses. The book is called *Augenspiegel*. And 500 years ago, it was the center of a major European controversy. Our story begins in 1509 in the Holy Roman Empire, a large region that included present day Germany and surrounding areas. Now, Jews hadn’t been kicked out of the Holy Roman Empire the way they’d been kicked out of England and France and Spain. But they were more tolerated than accepted. So when a man named Johannes Pfefferkorn presented the emperor with a plan to confiscate and burn all Jewish books—except the Holy Bible, of course—the emperor seriously considered it. But one man, a non-Jewish legal scholar named Johannes Reuchlin, managed to stop the plot from going forward. What followed has been referred to as “a battle of the books” between the two Johannes: Pfefferkorn and Reuchlin.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Pfefferkorn knew how to press emotional buttons, and he was a sensationalist in his approach. Today, he would probably be a journalist for a tabloid or

something like that. Whereas, Reuchlin was very effective with legal arguments, but he was not above name-calling.

THEME UP

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Erika Rummel is a former professor of Renaissance history. She writes historical fiction, but she's also the author of *The Case Against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in 16th Century Germany*. This story has everything: political power grabs, bribery, and even a late Middle Ages version of a flame war. The story grapples with issues that are shockingly contemporary, like religious fundamentalism and the extent of media influence. It's hard to believe it all happened so long ago.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Erika, this is a pretty complicated story, so I want to start with the brilliantly named Johannes Pfefferkorn, a name that sounds straight out of some comedy, probably Monty Python. I mean, no wonder he was part of a timeless historical drama.

ERIKA RUMMEL: [laughing] No, no. Yeah, yeah. Lends itself to satire!

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Exactly, exactly. Who was Johannes Pfefferkorn, and what was his role in what became the eventual story of the *Augenspiegel*?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Pfefferkorn was a Jew who converted to Christianity, and also was very active as a missionary. And for this purpose, he wrote a number of books in which he claimed that Jewish books were blasphemous and hostile and ridiculing Christian faith. And so, he set in motion a campaign to confiscate and destroy these books. Why did he do that? Well, you know, what motivated him, and I would say that's a well-known

phenomenon, he was a recent convert, and they tend to be more radical and more strident, and they want to prove something to themselves, that they did the right thing converting to Christianity. And to others, that they have fully converted and he's no longer a Jew, he's now a Christian.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It's sort of like when I got an electric car, and all of a sudden I wanted to tell everyone about it.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yeah. [laughter] You became a missionary for electric cars, right?

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Exactly. So, he was a layperson. He was very friendly with the Dominicans, with the religious order of the Roman Catholic Church. They had a lot of power. He's an adult convert to Catholicism. As you said, he's intent on burning Jewish books. Maybe he has something to prove. He gets a plan in front of the emperor asking for permission to start confiscating books. And the emperor is initially sympathetic, but then he gets cold feet. Why does that happen?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Well, because questions were raised about the legality of the procedure—more specifically, about who was entitled to give Pfefferkorn permission to confiscate. Now, Pfefferkorn, originally, went to the emperor and the emperor gave him a mandate. But even in this mandate, he said he could only do the confiscations in the presence of a member of the city council and a priest. Now, the emperor said he was entitled because the Jews were constitutionally his subjects and governed by imperial law. But then, the City Council of Frankfurt, where this started, got into the act and said, "Just a moment, just a moment. The Jews are our subjects because we have the right of taxation." And this was very important to them. I mean, don't anybody touch their right of taxing the Jews. And then, the third person pops up, and that's the Archbishop of Mainz, and says, "You say these books are blasphemous? Well, wait a minute. That's for the church to decide." So, there are now three parties who want to have a say in this. And so, the archbishop, in fact, forbade his priests to accompany Pfefferkorn. So, the action stopped right there.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So, this is really interesting. You have three different parties, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, the Archbishop of Mainz, and the local principalities with their taxation powers. And all of them have a different stake in what's going on here. All of them have a different opinion about whom the Jews answer to and what the Jews are good for. Pfefferkorn takes his case first to Emperor Maximilian, who initially says, "Sure, let's confiscate these books. Why not?" Then, the people who levy taxes say, "Hold on a second. We get to decide what to do with the Jews." Then, the Archbishop of Mainz says, "Hold on a second. We're the ones who decide what's heretical and what's not." So at this point, enter the main protagonist of our story, another Johannes, Johannes Reuchlin. Who's he?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Okay. So, how does he enter the story? It's because the archbishop and the emperor decide the usual, we do that still today. If it's questionable, have a committee decide! So, they form a committee. And in this committee, you have theology professors from four universities, and you have another convert who is an ex-rabbi, and Johannes Reuchlin, who is the legal expert. So you asked me, who is Reuchlin? He was a high profile lawyer and well-respected jurist, and he was also a university professor teaching Hebrew.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It's so interesting, right, that we really are at the birth of modernity here in several ways. First of all, there is a secular humanistic establishment of legal experts who are pushing back against, not only monarchical authority, the emperor, but also against religious authority, the Archbishop. They all have certain claims to authority in the way they wouldn't have two or three or 500 years earlier. Also, you have an era in which the lawyers and the priests are both pretty important. Lawyers have become people you have to reckon with, which again, wouldn't really have been the case, I think, 500 years ago in medieval times. But by the time you get to the Renaissance, all of a sudden, it's like, you have to call in the lawyer. It's very modern. It feels almost like we're watching *Boston Legal* or *LA Law* or something. It's a contemporary legal show.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yeah. And the university! You know, you need the experts here. And so, it would be the theologians and the lawyers and, "Okay. Let's throw in an ex-rabbi, okay?"

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Right. The ex-rabbi. You have the tenured experts, you have the committee, everything gets sent to committee. It's really, in some ways, the beginning of the end of just monarchical or church fiat. All of a sudden, you have committees with so-called experts, which is just, you know. Again, it feels very yesterday. Let's focus on Johannes Reuchlin, who you brought up. He's a legal scholar. He's not Jewish. He has been thinking about it. He deliberates for several months and he shares this opinion with the emperor. What does the opinion say? Why does he want to protect Jewish texts?

ERIKA RUMMEL: You know, in literature, sometimes Reuchlin is depicted as the great hero who comes to the rescue of the Jews and who sort of single-handedly prevents this catastrophe from happening. Well, I don't think that he acted out of friendship for the Jews, which was a crime in the 16th century, and for which he was promptly prosecuted. I think he acted, first of all, as a scholar. And the Jewish books, to him, were valuable historical documents. And he wanted them preserved, not because he wanted this cultural monument preserved for the Jews. No, he wanted it preserved for Christian scholars who needed them for missionary tasks, to be able to engage with Jews in an intelligent and meaningful conversation. And it's interesting to note that also in this report, he urged universities to offer courses in Hebrew, because he said that the Old Testament cannot be understood without Hebrew, and he wanted those Jewish commentaries preserved for Christian missionaries. So, that was an important motivation for him. These reports were supposed to be confidential, but they were leaked to Pfefferkorn who published all that. And that forced Reuchlin's hand and now he published his own report with annotations, with explanations, and this he entitled *Augenspiegel*.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What does *Augenspiegel* mean in German?

ERIKA RUMMEL: It means “eye mirror,” and that's a bit baffling, perhaps, for modern readers. So, think of “mirror” in the old-fashioned sense of a looking glass. So, the title is an invitation to the reader to take a closer look at this affair.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Tell us a little bit more about it. How long was it? How was it published? How was it disseminated?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Pfefferkorn's book that leaked the news appeared at the Frankfurt book fair, which still exists, was one of the largest book fairs, and every bookseller went there to get the newest books. So, Reuchlin managed to publish his in time to also appear at the Frankfurt book fair. So, that's how it got out.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It's so funny. Yeah. You're totally right, the Frankfurt book fair is still the big European book fair to this day.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yeah, yeah. So it got out, it got a good audience there. And, you know, I said that, in the *Augenspiegel*, he spoke primarily as a scholar. Well, he also spoke, of course, as a lawyer. And he pointed out, in this book, that both the secular and the church laws protect the rights of the Jews to practice their religion and their customs. And in this context that he uses a very interesting term, he uses the term “fellow citizens.” He calls the Jews fellow citizens, which is a very progressive term, and possibly unique, at least I don't know of anyone else, at the time, who used that term. So, he also presented a very good legal argument saying, you know, these people are entitled to the protection of the law, just like any other resident of the empire. And there is a law that says you can confiscate books that are libelous or that are harmful, but you need a formal judgment to do that. And if you don't have a formal judgment, like Pfefferkorn, he states this very clearly, it's illegal to confiscate.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: He also writes, in this document, the famous line, don't burn what you don't understand. What does that mean?

ERIKA RUMMEL: I think, well, you could take that literally. Because of all the committee members, only the ex-rabbi and Reuchlin actually read Hebrew. The rest of the people condemned books that they had never read and were never going to be able to read. So, he's absolutely justified in pointing this out.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Essentially, go do your homework.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yeah.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Now, Reuchlin had company, but most of the company he had were other Jews who joined him in the fight to defend Jewish books. What was the Jews' response to all of this?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Well, the Jewish community got involved immediately and sent a representative to lobby the Imperial Court. And we have about a dozen letters from this man in which he begs the Jewish community to collect money and send him the money because he has to bribe people at the Imperial Court. And he says, and I quote, this is a wonderful line, he says, "The outcome of this affair depends on God and our wallets." And he's very specific, in his letters, whom he had to bribe and how much he had to pay.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: I mean, this is really so contemporary. This is *House of Cards*. This is a Netflix series right here. As the song goes, "this is lawyers, guns, and money." So, Reuchlin argues, don't burn the books. But he is in the minority, the other experts on this committee, as you call it, side with Pfefferkorn. In the end, how does the emperor decide? Is he on team Pfefferkorn with the Dominican friars and priests? Or is he on team Reuchlin with the humanists?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Well, again, it appears that it came down to money, because what you have to know is that the emperor was at war at the time with some cities in northern Italy. And his closest, and essential ally, was in financial difficulties. He had an overdue loan. The loan was held by, of all people, Frankfurt Jews. And so, it wasn't until the

Frankfurt moneylenders agreed to extend the loan of this guy, that the emperor then said, "Okay, fine. We'll stop it." So, money was definitely behind this final decision to forget about the whole thing.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Meanwhile, Pfefferkorn's not happy about any of this. He's published a pamphlet to express his anger. Then, Reuchlin publishes a pamphlet. And then, you have a pamphlet war, which is basically like a flame war ~~on a blog or on social media~~ today. We're in the early years of the printing press, which, of course, comes out of German lands. This is ground zero for the printing press. And one of these pamphlets is the *Augenspiegel*, which lays out the legal argument. So what is the argument? What is Pfefferkorn saying, and what is Reuchlin responding?

ERIKA RUMMEL: First, it needs to be said that both of these guys were very good with words. They were really effective writers. Pfefferkorn knew how to press emotional buttons, and he was a sensationalist in his approach. To give you an example, saying that the Jews are harmful to German society, they ought to be expelled. And if not expelled, they ought to be engaged in demeaning tasks, make them shovel dog shit or clean out outhouses. So, today, he would probably be a journalist for a tabloid or something like that. Whereas, Reuchlin was very effective with legal arguments, but he was not above name-calling. And he calls Pfefferkorn an ignorant half-Jew, didn't buy the conversion thing. [laughter] And the theology professors, he said, were clowns and blatherers, and not theologians, but devilogians. You said they flamed each other, yes, that's the word.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Now, reading these things now, of course modern sensibilities are sympathetic with Reuchlin. But back then, Pfefferkorn had the Dominicans on his side, and Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans continued to attack Reuchlin. And what ends up happening to him? He's put on trial, right?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yeah. So, the inquisitor put him on trial on charges of Judaism, which is being too friendly with the Jews. That was heresy, right? Heresy. So then, Reuchlin

did a very neat thing, that only a lawyer would do. He asked for a change of venue from Cologne, where he knew the judge was hostile to him, to Speyer, where he knew that the judge was friendly to him, and that judge acquitted him. But the inquisitor immediately appealed that acquittal to the papal court where another committee was struck, which deliberated for several years and recommended that the acquittal be upheld. But the final judgment was up to the Pope, and the Pope sat on it for years until 1520. We're now 11 years after Pfefferkorn started his campaign. And he pronounced Reuchlin guilty, but he dropped the charge of heresy. He was guilty of scandalizing people with his books. That was the verdict. Now, Reuchlin was not going to take that, and he appealed the papal verdict to the emperor, which was a really murky move. But at that point, neither the emperor nor the Pope were interested in Jewish books anymore because Luther had appeared on the stage and they had more serious things to worry about than the Jewish books. And so, nothing happened.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Right. They're about to end up in lots of Protestant civil wars. I want to back up one second. The town of Speyer, where he was initially acquitted, very famous town in Jewish history, it's where we get the name Shapiro.

ERIKA RUMMEL: That's right.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It's one of the great centers of Jewish learning. Was it back then already a significant center of Jewish learning and scholarship when he was acquitted there?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yes. Frankfurt, Mainz, and Speyer were probably the three cities in the empire where Jews had a large community.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So, this whole affair has a really significant meaning for the history of European Jewry. Did it affect the perception of Jewish books or Jewish studies at the time?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Well, you know, that's a difficult question. I mean, it's true that, especially in the second half of the 16th century, the position of Jews stabilized. But I would not say that it was the Reuchlin affair that directly caused this. I would say it was perhaps more a shift in attention away from Jews, who were "the other," to Protestants, who now suddenly were "the other." Because I think the situation, otherwise, remained substantially the same. The society remained segregated, and Jews remained to be seriously discriminated against. For example, they were not able to go to university, which excluded them from a number of professions. And that did not change until the Enlightenment in the 18th century when laws were changed, that finally gave some civic rights to Jews. So yes, it was a very important trial, but it's difficult to link that trial to a specific outcome.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: But it did have some role in prompting the rise of Jewish studies as an academic pursuit, right?

ERIKA RUMMEL: Definitely. But again, I don't know whether that had any effect on the Jews, whether that was not more important for Christian scholars.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Yeah. And Germany does end up becoming one of the centers of Old Testament scholarship, largely because of Christian scholars of the Old Testament.

ERIKA RUMMEL: Yes. That's rather ironic. Yeah.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Is it important to remember this story today? Does it have anything to teach us in 2024?

ERIKA RUMMEL: I would think so. I mean, first of all, we have already, repeatedly commented on how very modern all of this sounds. But also, I would say that this irony, that a Jew attacks other Jews, and that a non-Jew, an ethnic German, defends them. I think what we can learn from that is that it's not a matter of whether you're Jewish or not Jewish, the problem is religious fanaticism or fanaticism in general. And it's that today,

it's very relevant to today because it's still fanaticism that keeps us from having peace and having toleration. And I think the second one is, you know, you quoted, "don't burn what you can't understand". And again, you know, there are still people today who want to, if not burn, then to remove books from libraries, remove books from a curriculum, because, like Pfefferkorn, they believe if you suppress the book, you can suppress thought. And so it's unfortunately still relevant. And we hope that people will come around to understand that you ought to read these books and discuss them rationally before you pass judgment on them.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Well, for your non-fanatical rational discussion, Erika Rummel, we thank you.

ERIKA RUMMEL: You're welcome. Thank you so much for having me.

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Erika Rummel. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. This was our final episode of the season and we're so glad you joined us. If you enjoyed these episodes, please recommend them to friends and rate us on your favorite podcast platform. Those ratings help people find podcasts they will love. And we thank you.

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