

Sabine Schmidtke

Scholar of Islam, Victim of the Holocaust



The Tragic Story of Hedwig Klein



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Preface

“Seid Menschen!”
(Margot Friedländer)

The tragic case of the Jewish scholar Hedwig Klein (1911–1942) is well known. A student of Islamica, Semitica, and English philology and literature at Hamburg, Klein passed her oral doctoral exams on 18 December 1937. Both the exams and her dissertation were given the highest possible grade. However, when she handed in the revised dissertation in November 1938, the influence of the Nazi race laws was already at work; she was denied the *imprimatur* and hence the doctoral degree. Beginning in 1937, Klein had begun to search for ways to leave Germany with the support of her former teachers and other friends. An opportunity to emigrate to India presented itself during the summer of 1939 but eventually failed because of the imminent outbreak of World War II. Klein made it only as far as Antwerp before she had to return to Hamburg at the end of August 1939. Beyond her participation in the Harrassowitz project to compile a dictionary of modern Arabic between September 1941 and the spring or early summer of 1942, little is known about the conditions of her life in the following years. On 11 July 1942 Hedwig Klein was deported to Auschwitz, where she was murdered. In 1947 she was granted a posthumous doctoral degree.

Few primary sources for Hedwig Klein’s biography survive. Besides her high school certificate and her doctoral dissertation, only some of her letters to former teachers and other mentors have been preserved. Initial studies of Klein’s sad fate were published by Peter Freimark and Emeri van Donzel in 1991 and 1993, respectively, each focusing on a different set of sources. Since 2014, several blogs and online essays devoted to Klein’s fate have been published, and they have prompted an outpouring of shorter essays and blog posts focusing on her involvement with Hans Wehr’s *Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart* and the book’s alleged connection to efforts to produce an authorized Arabic translation of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Although these publications have been primarily interested in Wehr, rather than Klein herself, they initially triggered my interest in Hedwig Klein. I was struck by the lack of documentation in these blog posts and essays as well as the absence of any attempt to situate Klein’s biography within a larger framework. My subsequent search for relevant materials turned into an intriguing journey through a plethora of archival sources, each providing important clues to aspects of Klein’s short life and to her broader familial, social, and scholarly context.

This study attempts to shed light on Hedwig Klein’s environment(s) by investigating her extended family (Chapter 1.1); her time as a pupil at the Bieberstraßen-schule and the Lichtwarkschule, including her peers and teachers (Chapter 1.2);

and her studies and fellow students at Hamburg University (Chapter 1.3). The extent of the surviving documentary material on the many individuals whose lives I discuss varies significantly from case to case. To help distinguish less well-known individuals, I provide precise dates of birth and, if available, of death. If no dates are indicated, the dates are simply unknown. Chapter 1.4 analyzes Klein's scholarly contribution as manifested in her 1938 doctoral dissertation, one of the first critical editions of a work on the history of Ibādīsm in Oman, and places it within the context of the state of the art of Ibādī studies in the 1930s. In Chapters 1.5 and 1.7 I discuss the support Klein received from various quarters for her ultimately unsuccessful attempts to leave Germany between 1937 and 1942. Klein's principal scholarly contribution alongside her dissertation consists of the work she undertook for the Harrassowitz project *Neu-arabisches Wörterbuch* from September 1941 until the spring or early summer of 1942. Given the controversy around the project and her participation in it, Chapter 1.6 begins by outlining the long tradition of Western studies on Arabic lexicography and the many attempts to produce a dictionary of contemporary Arabic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This survey is followed by a history of the *Neu-arabisches Wörterbuch* in the 1930s and 1940s, as far as it can be established, and Klein's involvement with it. Contrary to the claims made on various blogs, Klein's contribution to the *Wörterbuch* was minimal when compared to those of other contributors, but its scholarly quality, like that of her doctoral dissertation, was superb. In fact, both her dissertation and her contributions to the *Wörterbuch* demonstrate her erudition as a philologist and an Arabist, as well as her assiduity and her perfectionism—the latter a quality that sadly cost her the chance to save her life, since she insisted on perfecting her dissertation before submitting it, despite the growing persecution she faced as a Jew under Nazi rule and the increasingly urgent advice of her teachers. Chapter 1.8 traces the afterlife of Klein's dissertation and the posthumous granting of her doctorate, and Chapter 1.9 surveys the ways she has been remembered in subsequent scholarship. Finally, Chapter 1.10 discusses the alleged connection between the *Wörterbuch* project and the German authorities' attempts to produce an authorised Arabic translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*—a recurring theme in popular writings about Hedwig Klein since 2014. The chapter demonstrates that there is in fact no connection between the two projects; the claim is based on a misreading of a 1938 letter by the head of the Orient desk of the German Foreign Office, Werner Otto von Hentig. My correction to this dominant narrative is not meant to downplay the difficulties that Klein faced during her work for the dictionary nor to endorse wholesale how she was treated in the process. I am also not invested in exonerating Hans Wehr from the charge of Nazi sympathies, although that charge is unfounded. Rather, my intention is to set the historical record straight and to

counter the misleading sensationalism with which this episode has been treated and which is, above all, unfair to Klein's legacy.

Klein's tragic life story is a microhistory of a deeply troubled but incredibly fascinating historical moment, which had major implications for the trajectory of Islamic studies in the twentieth century and up to the present day. As such, her fate stands as a reminder of the impact of the Holocaust on the production of knowledge about Islam writ large, especially in Germany, but also globally. The Nazis' rise to power in 1933 marked a turning point in the development of the discipline of Arabic and Islamic studies. Its repercussions extended well beyond Germany and continental Europe. It signaled the end of German scholars' leadership in the discipline and of German as the principal language of scholarship, and it resulted in an internationalization that left the field very different from what it had been in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the months following Hitler's inauguration as chancellor on 30 January 1933, the Nazi Party's success in the 5 March 1933 parliamentary elections, and the passage of the Enabling Act on 24 March 1933, measures were taken to banish Jews from civil society, including institutions of higher education. These measures had an immediate effect on faculty in German universities. Jewish scholars were forced into retirement, and Jewish students were eventually no longer permitted to earn doctoral degrees. Over the next few years, many of them chose to leave Germany, but a large number of Jewish scholars and students of Oriental studies were murdered during the Holocaust. Those who managed to avoid deportation and murder by leaving Germany before 23 October 1941, when all Jewish emigration from Germany was officially banned and deportations to concentration camps began, were dispersed around the world. Some went to Mandatory Palestine, others to the United States, Belgium, England, France, and Turkey. Many continued to emigrate to other countries, and not all of them found ways to continue their academic careers. Whereas many Jewish Orientalists who settled in Mandatory Palestine, later Israel, managed to continue some aspects of the German scholarly tradition at the Hebrew University, which had been founded in 1925, this was not the case for others who pursued their careers elsewhere—including non-Jewish scholars who were forced into exile during those years.

As I finish this book, I would like to express my gratitude to the many colleagues who have supported, helped, and advised me. In Hamburg, Rainer Nicolaysen, Hendrik Althoff, and Susan Johannsen familiarized me with the Staatsarchiv's holdings and complexities. Mark Emanuel Amtstätter and his team (Andrea Diekert and Gitte Walther) at the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky went out of their way to help me access the archives of various Hamburg Orientalists. Johanna Blautzik made every effort to open relevant resources in the Hamburger Bibliothek für Universitätsgeschichte to me. In Princeton, thanks

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This study is primarily based on unpublished archival materials, and the relevant letters and documents are reproduced with commentary in Part 2 of this book. I gratefully acknowledge the following archives and institutions, which granted me access to their holdings either in digital form or in situ and permitted me to include reproductions of selected documents in the study: Arbeitsstelle für Universitäts-geschichte, Universität Hamburg; Archiv des Amtsgerichts Hamburg; Archiv für Zeitgeschichte (ETH Zurich); Arolsen Archives: International Center on Nazi Persecution; Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich; Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften; the British Library, London; Bibliothek der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Halle; Bibliothek des Instituts für den Nahen Osten / Turkologie und Iranistik, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich; Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde; Bundesarchiv Koblenz; Center for Jewish History, New York; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin; Hamburger Schulmuseum; Hessisches Staatsarchiv, Marburg; Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Wiesbaden; Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden, Hamburg; Institut für Orient- und Asienwissenschaften, Bibliothek, Bonn University; Israel State Archives, Jerusalem; Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten, Berlin; Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin; Leiden University Libraries; Leo Baeck Institute, Jerusalem; Museum am Rothenbaum: Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg; Middle East Institute, Washington, DC; National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew; National Library of Israel, Jerusalem; Netherlands Institute for the Near East, Leiden; Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin; Seminar für Arabistik/Islamwissenschaft I, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen; Sourasky Central Library, Tel Aviv; Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky; Staatsar-

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I wrote much of this book in 2024 and 2025 as a fellow and alumna of the Hamburg Institute for Advanced Study (HIAS). This fellowship allowed me to work on relevant archival material held by the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, the Staatsarchiv Hamburg, and the Universitätsarchiv Hamburg. I would like to thank the entire HIAS staff, especially Dorothea Rüländ, Christian Suhm, Sonja Gräber-Magocsi, Ulrike Dorf Müller, and Tanja Kruse Brandao, for their support during my time in Hamburg.

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Princeton, NJ, April 2026



Figure 1: Portrait Hedwig Klein (StAHH, 364-13 Fakultäten/Fachbereiche, Phil. Fak., Promotion Nr. 668).

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