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**How New York artist Simon Dinnerstein encountered West Germany's reckoning with the past in 1970–71 : On Art and Everyday Life in Hessisch Lichtenau
by Klaus-Peter Friedrich,**

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How to view the New York artist Simon—and, in a sense, supplement Dinnerstein's own accounts.

Dinnerstein was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1943. His parents were the pharmacist Louis Dinnerstein (1904–1975) and his wife Sarah (1906–?), a homemaker. While his father was a native of New York, Sarah Kobilansky had been born in Russia. Simon had a brother, Harvey Dinnerstein (1928–2022), who was fifteen years his senior and trained as an artist in the 1940s. Simon initially studied history at City College of New York before pursuing similar interests (drawing and painting), though he attended a

different art school: the Brooklyn Museum Art School.³ In 1965, he married Renée Sudler (b. 1944), a future teacher from New York.

In the late 1960s, the aspiring artist...

Fig. 1: Simon Dinnerstein, Self-Portrait, detail from the *Fulbright Triptych*

Dinnerstein encounters West Germany's reckoning with its past (1970/71)

by Klaus-Peter Friedrich

On art and everyday life in Hessisch Lichtenau

A few years ago, I made an astonishing discovery at the Marburg State Archives. While researching Jewish history during the National Socialist era on behalf of Yad Vashem—the Israeli research center—within the files of the former Witzenhausen District Office, I also examined the post-1945 records of the *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police), a force responsible for tasks such as the surveillance of foreign nationals. Among the "individual cases" accessible here is one involving the New York artist Simon Dinnerstein.¹ This struck me as remarkable for two reasons: Simon Dinnerstein's family had no historical ties to Germany—meaning they were not part of the waves of emigration that began in the 19th century, nor did they flee as German Jews escaping National Socialist persecution. Furthermore, they were not part of the exodus of the Jewish population remaining in Europe immediately after World War II, when numerous refugees were housed in displaced persons camps, particularly in the US occupation zone of Germany.

Simon Dinnerstein has since described the circumstances of his stay in Germany from his own perspective on several occasions.² It therefore seems appropriate to examine this remarkable coincidence more closely from the standpoint of local and regional history.

The artist was barely scraping by financially. He applied for a Fulbright scholarship hoping to work with a Spanish painter he admired. He only considered taking up his scholarship in (West) Germany to study Dürer's engravings as a "second choice" in his application. But the Fulbright Foundation decided to send him to West Germany. A disappointment for him.⁴

In 1970, the newly minted Fulbright scholar first went to Boppard, where he attended a language course at the Goethe-Institut. Afterward, he traveled further into the West German provinces. Dinnerstein wanted to enroll at the Kassel School of Art and Design. The young couple couldn't afford an apartment there. Therefore, the Dinnersteins eventually ended up in the small town of Hessisch Lichtenau, about 30 km away. "It was a simple little town, with simple shops. We got to know a small group of people with whom we are still in contact today," the painter recalled in a recent interview with Hessian Broadcasting. But he spent "most of his time" at home – working.⁵

The Dinnersteins moved into an attic apartment at Quenteler Weg 31 with a view of the town – with a pointed church steeple in the center and the Hessian hills beyond. In 1971, "in April or May," Dinnerstein said, "I looked at the table with the supplies, the window, and the view, and I thought: This could be the basis for a great painting."⁶ The next day, he decided to add further elements to the view of Hessisch Lichtenau on both sides: a portrait of his wife and a portrait of himself, creating a triptych.

The Dinnersteins moved into an attic apartment at Quenteler Weg 31 with a view of the town – with a pointed church steeple in the center and the Hessian hills beyond. Dinnerstein then immortalized the

view of springtime Hessisch Lichtenau in an oil painting depicting a view from his window. However, the Fulbright fellow was not to complete his large, three-part mural just yet. With the expiration of his fellowship, he deregistered after a year, at the end of July 1971, and moved to Brooklyn. He traveled back to the United States with the already painted scene. What he didn't yet realize was that his luggage contained the foundation for his later career.

Back in New York, he showed his unfinished painting to an influential gallery owner. The owner was so enthusiastic about it that he offered to buy the painting from the artist and pay the purchase price in monthly installments over two years. And in the end, it would be exhibited. Dinnerstein found this “unbelievable, like a one in a million chance.”⁸ With it, he finally managed to gain a foothold and provide his family—his wife Renée was by then pregnant—with a future. Their daughter Simone Andréa was born in September 1972. She is also depicted in the triptych, which eventually reached four meters in length and was completed two years later. To the left of the view from the Lichtenau room window, she can be seen with her mother: a naked infant sitting on the lap of a dark-haired young woman. On the right, the painter has portrayed himself: a man with a full beard. They are looking directly at the viewer.⁹

Dinnerstein's first exhibition was enthusiastically received, which enabled him to go to Rome with another scholarship and begin an internationally acclaimed career. His painting, called *The Fulbright Triptych*, has become his calling card. Today it is considered a masterpiece of 1970s American realism.¹⁰ Reflecting on his initial dissatisfaction with being awarded a scholarship in West Germany, Dinnerstein now explains: “Out of not getting what I wanted, I ended up getting much more than I wanted.”¹¹

Since 1974, Dinnerstein's work has been frequently interpreted.¹² It lends itself to

It contains numerous allusions, including “a trompe l’oeil of miniature masterpieces from Holbein to Degas.” In 2011, an entire anthology was dedicated to The Fulbright Triptych – entitled “The Suspension of Time.”¹³ Editor Daniel Slager explains: “The painting [...] meticulously recreates everything from the engraving table, tools and creamy white radiator behind it, to the dozens of postcards of paintings he pinned up as inspiration on his walls.”¹⁴ His real theme, however, is to relate Simon Dinnerstein’s painting to the Holocaust, to give it a “Jewish backstory.”¹⁵ Although the artist grew up in a decidedly non-religious family,¹⁶ his Jewish identity shaped him. This also “influenced his time in Germany,” where he and his wife were constantly aware of their Jewishness. Simon Dinnerstein reports:¹⁷

“Renée [...] kind of got obsessed with asking people questions' about what they were doing during the Holocaust [...]. 'I thought it was a poor question, because, what could you do?' But [Dinnerstein] said she became less prying on account of one of

her students. Renée was tutoring a German high school student in English and American history, when she got to the issue of race. Renée started talking about the Civil Rights movement, when the student asked her ‘How could you live there?’, Renée said that she couldn’t figure out the answer to that [...]. And she then realized that she might not need to ask Germans a similar question about what they were doing while Hitler was in power either.”

According to Slager, however, the painting has “no explicit imagery of the Holocaust”; in fact, one does not even find any Jewish imagery in The Fulbright Triptych. And yet, various viewers have detected “a strong Jewish resonance” in it. Dinnerstein interprets such comments as an indication of his “Jewish intellectualism.” According to Slager, the miniature artworks that Dinnerstein recreates read like an encyclopedia of art history. Furthermore, there are literary facsimiles—from Herman Melville’s “Moby-

Dick” to a poem in the style of haiku. When the painting was exhibited at the German Consulate in New York in 2011, it became a focal point for a

However, regarding the exhibition, cultural officer and curator Thietmar Bachmann explained:

“Dinnerstein’s status as a Jewish artist who often notes the Holocaust’s influence on his work did not factor into [Bachmann’s] decision to mount the exhibit.”¹⁸

To Dinnerstein himself, **The Fulbright Triptych** appeared, four decades after its creation, as “a search for his own identity, his own way in the world.” Yet, by his own admission, its full meaning continued to elude him: “I can’t get my arms around this painting. As much as I put my arms around it, it eludes me, it still runs away.”¹⁹

How, then, should such later statements by Dinnerstein be evaluated in light of the post-National Socialist culture of remembrance in Hessisch Lichtenau?

What, then, is the basis for the fascination with the Lichtenau Triptych?

In 2011, the artist stated that, forty-one years earlier, he and his wife had deliberated over whether to accept the offered scholarship to Germany, ultimately deciding in favor of it.²⁰ For the couple, spending a year in an environment that was decidedly non-Jewish—among people for whom their Jewishness might have been a source of awkwardness—must have been a novel experience. They appear to have taken little notice of the political changes occurring in the Federal Republic at the time. For years, the discourse surrounding the legal prosecution of National Socialist perpetrators of violence had been a prominent feature of public debate in Germany. Chancellor Willy Brandt’s act of kneeling in Warsaw in December 1970—while facing the stone witnesses to the Nazi genocide of the Jews—is not reflected in Dinnerstein’s recollections. In a recently published book, D. Z. Stone sheds new light on the origins of

the culture of remembrance in Hessisch Lichtenau—a small town that was anything but provincial during the Nazi era.²¹ She has produced a compelling book on how the Federal Republic of Germany grappled with its past and on the culture of remembrance in the rural region of northern Hesse; the work reflects a significant development that altered the perspective on the Nazi past at the time.

It should be noted at the outset that, unlike in nearby towns shaped by the rural Jewish communities of Hesse, there had been no Jewish communal life in Hessisch Lichtenau.²² Consequently, there were no visible architectural traces of a historical presence, such as a synagogue or a Jewish cemetery.²³ However, the "Aryanization" of Jewish-owned businesses did take place. This included the cigar factory founded by Louis Wolff (1830–1906). The textile company Fröhlich & Wolff—which was also "Aryanized"—employed as many as 1,432 people in 1933.²⁴

Hessisch Lichtenau did not escape a role in the machinery of the Nazi genocide of the Jews; this role arose from the town's inclusion in the Wehrmacht's rearmament program. In the late 1930s, a massive explosives and munitions factory, complete with its own rail connection, was built in the adjacent Hirschhagen forest area. A housing estate and ten barrack camps were constructed to accommodate the workforce, which included forced laborers. The latter served as satellite camps for the Buchenwald concentration camp. To maintain operations during the final phase of the war, the National Socialists transported 1,000 Jewish women—deported from Hungary—from Auschwitz to Hesse; there, around 800 of them were forced to perform hazardous slave labor under unspeakable conditions.²⁵

When Simon Dinnerstein settled in Hessisch Lichtenau in 1970, the National Socialist crimes against humanity—thanks to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem—

...as already described in the context of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, the public had been confronted with their full force. Yet, across the Federal Republic, there was a refusal to acknowledge the local historical connections to everyday life under National Socialism. Consequently, there was no realization that every community had, in its own way, been part of the "Auschwitz system." Most people who had lived through the rise and fall of the Third Reich preferred not to revisit that past.

A lack of historical awareness characterized the way Hessisch Lichtenau dealt with its Nazi past. Throughout the 1970s, a "facade" was maintained—symbolized by the "German Fairy Tale Route," inaugurated to boost tourism, which ran through the small town (among others) associated with the figure of Frau Holle.²⁶ And it seems the Dinnersteins, too, were dazzled by this facade that masked such grim realities. They perceived their picturesquely situated "little town" as an idyllic half-timbered setting.²⁷ There is no indication in the visual imagery that the Holocaust held any significance for them at the time, or that they took an interest in the means by which it was being prosecuted or how the perpetrators and others responsible were to be punished. Yet it would have been easy for Dinnerstein to include—alongside the numerous art-historical allusions—a press clipping showing the head of government of his host country kneeling before the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw. Alternatively, he could have photographed the traces left behind by Lichtenau's explosives production; the ruins on the former factory grounds—destroyed in 1945 and by then overgrown with vegetation—were easily accessible for inspection. After all, the complex had once comprised numerous structures spanning an area of 350 hectares. For members of the younger generation, this was an adventure playground—forbidden, yet popular.

Dinnerstein also apparently overlooked the fact that, under the US military government, the former factory buildings were used to house displaced persons under the auspices of the UNRRA. The "Herzog" DP camp—which existed from 1946 to 1949 and was named after its Munich-based architect,

Hans Herzog (1883–1962)—served as a destination for many Jewish deportees and refugees from all parts of Eastern Europe.²⁸ Evidence of this can be found in the large number of applications for "restitution" preserved in the records of the former Witzenhausen district administration.²⁹

From the 1960s onwards, "toxic residues in the drinking water" became a source of public controversy,³⁰ as news periodically emerged that groundwater contamination stemmed from substances linked to the production of the explosive TNT. Thus, in 1983, a new phase of post-National Socialist commemorative culture began, initiated by a class from the Freiherr-vom-Stein-Gesamtschule and their teacher, Dieter Vaupel.³¹ Their efforts brought to light the fact that "one of the German Reich's largest explosives factories" had been located near Hessisch Lichtenau—a facility that, under National Socialism, had been given the misleading cover name "Friedland."³² Locally, the plant was known as the "chocolate factory."³³

Efforts to trace and investigate the legacy of Nazi crimes met with resistance. Unlike Anna Rosmus (b. 1960) in Passau—who was branded the "nasty girl" in her hometown—there was a certain openness in Hesse, and allies were found among people other than just young students.

When viewing Simon Dinnerstein's statements against the backdrop of Hessisch Lichtenau's local history under National Socialism and its culture of remembrance, the situation appears different from how it is perceived in his hometown of New York. For Dinnerstein's...

The painting derives its fascination precisely from the tension inherent in a constellation that was unusual for 1970: a New York artist who identified as Jewish had settled—of all places—in the heart of Germany, roughly three decades after the onset of the genocide against the Jewish population. There, he celebrated a seemingly carefree small-town life, framed by pristine nature that was just awakening to new life.

Yet another combination is unusual. Dinnerstein—who grew up in a secular household yet saw himself as an artist who was Jewish through and through—employs a deeply Christian artistic form of expression in this monumental triptych. His models thus hark back to the European Christian art of the late "Dark Ages."³⁴ In doing so, he connects with an era...

Notes

1 Hessian State Archive Marburg (HStAM), 180 Witzenhausen.

2 Details regarding the family biography can also be found on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Dinnerstein, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey_Dinnerstein, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone_Dinnerstein.

3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/arts/design/simon-dinnerstein-the-fulbright-triptych-review.html>.

4 Eric Herschthal: The Jewish Echoes In "The Fulbright Triptych." Forty years after Simon Dinnerstein completed his monumental painting, the complex work is getting a fresh look, in: Jewish Telegraphic Agency, New York Jewish Week, August 3, 2011, <https://www.jta.org/2011/08/03/ny/the-jewish-echoes-in-the-fulbright-triptych>.

5 See Jan Tussing, Alexandra Müller-Schmieg: "Why a painting from Hessisch Lichtenau..."

...where Europe's Jewish population was exposed to persecution in many places.

Moreover, what profound historical symbolism lies in the fact that it was precisely the concern over toxic residues in the drinking water in Hessisch Lichtenau that triggered the effort to get to the bottom of the Nazi past. Thus, the poisoned water, too, could be laid at the door of the National Socialists!

Just as Vaupel and his fellow campaigners had striven forty years earlier—in the face of local resistance—to help Auschwitz survivors gain recognition for their suffering and achieve justice, he now finds himself increasingly appreciated by institutions committed to Holocaust remembrance, extending as far as California.³⁵ In this context, D. Z. Stone's book—like Dinnerstein's Lichtenau Triptych itself—serves as an example of the ongoing internationalization of this act of remembrance.

"...travels through American museums," in: Hessischer Rundfunk, hr2-kultur, February 16, 2023 (on the occasion of Simon Dinnerstein's 80th birthday), <https://www.hessenschau.de/kultur/fulbright-triptychon-warum-ein-bild-aus-hessisch-lichtenau-durch-amerikanische-museen-wandert-v2,gemaelde-macht-hessisch-lichtenau-beruehmt-100.html>.

6 Ibid. 7 Herschthal, *The Jewish Echoes*

8 Ibid.

9 The painting is currently housed at the Palmer Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University. It can be viewed online at <https://vimeo.com/92970548> and on the McMullen Museum of Art website: <https://www.bc.edu/sites/artmuseum/exhibitions/dinnerstein/>.

10 Tussing and Müller-Schmieg, Fig. 11 Herschthal, *The Jewish Echoes*.

12 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Dinnerstein.

13 Daniel Slager (ed.): **The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych**. Milkweed Editions, New York 2011.

14 Herschthal, **The Jewish Echoes**.

15 Ibid.

16 Dinnerstein describes his father as

“a resolute left Communist” who remained a member of the Communist Party (Communist Party of the USA) until the end of his life in the 1970s.

17 Herschthal, *The Jewish Echoes*.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 D. Z. Stone: *Ein Märchen wird demaskiert. Wie ein Lehrer und seine Schüler die verborgene Vergangenheit ihrer Stadt aufdecken* [A Fairy Tale Unmasked: How a Teacher and His Students Uncover Their Town’s Hidden Past], Marburg 2023.

22 See the lecture given in 2013 by Gunnar Richter: *Zur Verfolgung in Hessisch Lichtenau während der NS-Zeit und zur Auseinandersetzung mit dem damaligen Geschehen* [On Persecution in Hessisch Lichtenau During the Nazi Era and the Engagement with Events of That Time]; www.vhghessen.de/hess_lichtenau/Richter_Vortrag_Verfolgung.pdf,
here p. 2.

23 In 1925, there were only five Jewish individuals among the approximately 2,500 inhabitants. Until the 19th century, a Jewish cemetery was located about one kilometer south of the town within the municipal

boundaries of Retterode; Karl Kollmann / Thomas Wiegand: *Spuren einer Minderheit. Jüdische Friedhöfe 14

Dokumentation (National Socialism in North Hesse, Vol. 8), Kassel 1984; *Spuren*
die nicht vergehen. Eine Studie über
Zwangsarbeit und Entschädigung (National Socialism in North Hesse, Vol. 12), Kassel 1990.

32 Stone, *Märchen*, p. 73.

33 Ibid., p. 61.

34 The McMullen Museum of Art website states, among other things: "Adopting the medieval sacred form of an altar-sized triptych, he substitutes secular and highly personal, idiosyncratic iconography for traditional religious subject matter. In the central panel he features an engraved

plate and printmakers' tools below two windows depicting views from his studio in Kassel [...]. He fills the walls of each panel with details of well known Old Master paintings, drawings, and prints, children's drawings, photographs, quotes, and sketches." <https://www.bc.edu/sites/artmuseum/exhibitions/dinnerstein/>.

Here, instead of Kassel, it should read:

Hessisch Lichtenau. 35 Stone, *Märchen*, pp. 128 f.