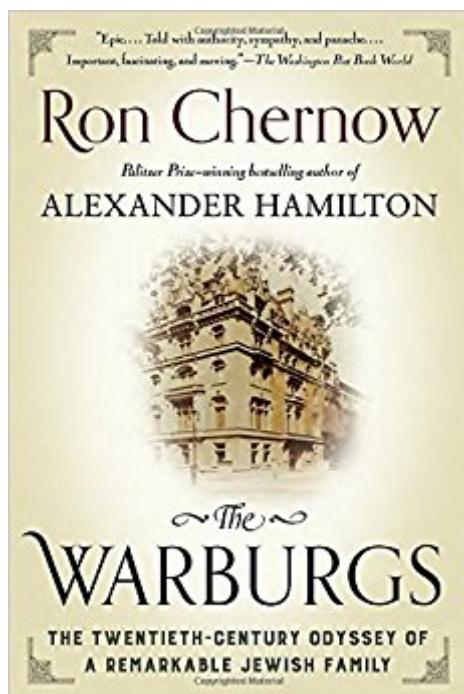


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# The Warburgs: The Twentieth-Century Odyssey Of A Remarkable Jewish Family



## Synopsis

From the Pulitzer Prizeâ “winning bestselling author of Alexander Hamilton, the inspiration for the hit Broadway musical, comes this definitive biography of the Warburgs, one of the great German-Jewish banking families of the twentieth century. Bankers, philanthropists, scholars, socialites, artists, and politicians, the Warburgs stood at the pinnacle of German (and, later, of German-American) Jewry. They forged economic dynasties, built mansions and estates, assembled libraries, endowed charities, and advised a German kaiser and two American presidents. But their very success made the Warburgs lightning rods for anti-Semitism, and their sense of patriotism became increasingly dangerous in a Germany that had declared Jews the enemy. Ron Chernow’s hugely fascinating history is a group portrait of a clan whose members were renowned for their brilliance, culture, and personal energy yet tragically vulnerable to the dark and irrational currents of the twentieth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

All three of Ron Chernow’s books are lengthy and solidly researched, but his background as a journalist shows in his ability here to convey complex material in terms of vivid characters and a well-defined theme. As in his National Book Award-winning business history (*The House of Morgan*) and his comprehensive biography of John D. Rockefeller (*Titan*), in *The Warburgs* Chernow employs marvelously detailed material to trace a single overarching story: the riveting and ultimately tragic odyssey of German Jews. The Warburgs were Hamburg’s preeminent banking family from the 18th century until Hitler’s Third Reich forced them to hand over their business to Aryans in 1938. But

they also boasted among their family members a celebrated art historian (Aby Warburg), a Nobel Prize-winning scientist (Otto Warburg), and the financial angel of the New York City Ballet (Edward Warburg). Two of the "Famous Five" brothers married American women at the turn of the 20th century and became honored members of the Wall Street establishment, so Chernow's lively narrative imparts important U.S. social and economic history as well. But don't let all those fancy credentials intimidate you: The Warburgs features enough flamboyant personalities and high-class gossip to make this as entertaining a read as the latest issue of People magazine. --Wendy Smith  
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The rich, sprawling story of 400 years of a German-Jewish banking family by the author of The House of Morgan . Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I imagine I'm going to get unhelpful votes by saying this, but this biography was not up to par with the author's other biographies. I've read Titan, which I thought was great, House of Morgan, which was really good, and Hamilton, which was also good, and this book just isn't up to those other books. The beginning was very frustrating because we learn about this supposedly very successful and widely acclaimed and established German banking family, yet there is practically nothing concerning how they got to be well known and exceedingly wealthy, nor what their business dealings were at the time. And this lack of information goes on and on, focusing almost to exclusion on inter-personal issues. Looking up the Warburgs in Wikipedia, I learned that the family had been a very successful banking family from the 1600's back in Venice, even before they settled in Warburg, Germany. Starting the narrative in the mid to late 1800's with the success of Jews in what was to become Germany just left me hanging and feeling like I was missing a large part of who the Warburgs were and how they got that way. Additionally, the family had been around for a very long time and there are scattered references to visiting or staying with uncles and aunts, but the overall breadth of the family is not addressed. Thinking about his problem now, it almost would make more sense and read better if there was a short intro and perhaps 10 separate bios on separate family members, instead of skipping around. It would help the flow. I have a feeling the author's inability to read German or Swedish or other European languages and his lack of primary research in Europe, where the Warburgs achieved fame and fortune, contributed to this incomplete biography. On the other hand, it appears that not much had been written on the Warburgs prior to this book (at least in English), and that is why I read the book. Additionally, the whole build up to the Holocaust and how

the Warburgs kept their warm feelings for Germany throughout the experience, as a constant theme, was very interesting and well done, especially since I'm Jewish. The reading got more focused and poignant the closer the Holocaust got and immediately afterwards. 3 or 3.5 stars is probably the best score, but will upgrade so I don't get canned too badly. If you're interested in the Warburg it's a good starter book, though I imagine if this weren't one of the first books Chernow wrote, he would have done a better job as a more mature and accomplished biographer.

While less well known than his later biographies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, this book stands equal to them. Rather than a biography of a single man this is the biography of a most extraordinary family and their impact on banking and the history of the twentieth century. This is a terrific book and one that I recommend without reservation. Chernow tells a very complex story in the tradition of a great novelist, without sacrificing any of the historical details that define the picture of a family whose story mirrors the triumphs and tragedies of the 20th century. The book traces the history of the Warburg family from the 16th century to the 1990's, with the emphasis on the 20th century. The story is told through the biographies of many of its members, focusing on the brothers Aby, Max, Paul, Felix and Fritz, their sons and nephews. Individual chapters cover individuals, interwoven and progressing through the 20th century. There is the scholarly eldest brother, Aby, who exchanged his birthright for the promise of being provided all the books he desired (and created one of the world's greatest private libraries), the next eldest brother Max who autocratically ran the family's Hamburg bank, the next brother Paul who made his mark in the US (providing the banking expertise behind his idea for the US Federal Reserve System), Felix who also made his mark in the US (both as a banker, but even more so as a philanthropist) and on to the youngest Fritz who served in both the Prussian and American Armies, and eventually fought to revive the Warburg position as preeminent Hamburg bankers. The book follows these brothers and their nephew Sigmund who made his mark in the US, in Great Britain (becoming Sir Sigmund) and in Europe after WWII. The book also discusses the sons of these brothers, their wives and other relatives. Fortunately, there are several pages of genealogy charts which help in keeping all the relationships between family members straight and many photographs that help flesh out the many stories that are discussed. Were the book just about the history of the family members it would have been very good, but it is about much more. The book is about the turmoil of 20th century Germany, about how this family suffered and recovered. It is about family members who were loyal to their adopted homes in the US and Great Britain, but still, before the 1930's, had strong emotional ties to Germany. It tries to explain how some in the family still had warm feelings for Germany, in spite of

what happened to them in the 1930's. It is about how Fritz left his comfortable life in the US to return to Germany to reestablish their stolen Hamburg bank, but also to serve as a bridge between Germany and the rest of the post-WWII world. It is about strong men with sons who often failed to live up to their high expectations. It is about loyalty, deceit, struggle, success and failure. It is a cautionary tail about the evolution of 20th century politics and war, as well as about banking. In short this is a terrific book.

Out of hundreds of books which I have recently read on the history of the 20th century, especially the 1930's 1940's and 1950's, this might be the best of all of them. Author Chernow has a totally incredible, unbelievable and amazing command of each and every fact relating to the Warburgs. If you want to find out the hidden facts about Kuhn, Loeb, you will find it in this book. If you want a completely accurate and balanced description about the holocaust and how it affected real people, this is your book. It is ten histories in one.

This multi-generational history of the Warburg banking dynasty, though not as riveting as Chernow's biographies of Rockefeller, Washington, and Hamilton, is definitely worth reading. In addition to the interesting, and often quirky, family members, one gets a very good sense of how assimilated the German Jews had become by the beginning of the twentieth century. And not only assimilated, but extremely successful, and integrated into the business and banking world, not only in Germany, but in America as well. The very detailed account of what was going on not only in the Warburg banking world, but also in their psyches, goes far to answer the question of why so many Jews refused to see the holocaust coming and leave the country. It documents well what Germany was like for wealthy Jewish families, up until some years into the 20th century, what it was in the national psyche that made the time ripe for Hitler, and the continued resistance of FDR to help the German Jews. I give The Warburgs three, rather than four, stars only by comparison with Chernow's other superb, page-turning biographies.

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