Michael Jebsen from Apenrade (Danish name: Aabenraa) in North Schleswig, in his capacity as shipowner and politician, left his mark in many parts of the world and also to some extent in German politics. Born under Danish rule he became a Prussian citizen soon after the conquest of Schleswig-Holstein by Prussian and Austrian troops in 1864. His identity was strongly affected by the mixed German-Danish population of his home region and the differences smouldering between them. In his biography Becker mentions that the dialect of North Schleswig (“Potato Danish”) was the spoken language in the house of Jebsen but that German was the written. Marriage with people from other regions led to the fact that the use of German increasingly won the upper hand. Frequent problems of identity and national conflict were the reasons that the author usually does not differentiate between Germans and Danes but between “German-oriented” and “Danish-oriented” individuals of whom Jebsen very decisively counted as one of the former. A large part of the monograph is devoted to the tests of endurance within the population and the changing history of Schleswig. Furthermore, Bert Becker presents a family saga of Jebsen’s ancestors and descendants from the 17th century until the present time. To the average German, the most well-known is Jebsen’s grandson Kai-Uwe von Hassel, born in German East Africa, and who was CDU politician, minister-president of Schleswig-Holstein for many years, and later the German federal minister of defence.

Becker states that recently biographies as a literary genre have enjoyed great popularity but that those of shipowners are the big exception, excluding those of Albert Ballin. For his study the author profited from the fact that since 2007, the different branches of the Jebsen concern and its partners have systematically organised their archive holdings, and have clearly supported his research. Hundreds of pictures, which also make the book an aesthetical pleasure, came mainly from the Jebsen Archive. The annex contains a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, a list of illustrations, and useful indexes of names of persons, companies, organisations, ships, and places. For his study Becker did comprehensive research in numerous archives, in Germany as well as in Denmark, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Britain, and China. His achievement can hardly be overestimated, and most authors would have probably capitulated in front of what would have seemed a Sisyphean effort. The findings which are gained are therefore remarkable, especially concerning German shipping in China but also with respect to German-Danish history. (…)

Review of Dr Gerhard Krebs, historian in Berlin, in Jahrbuch für Europäische Überseegeschichte [Yearbook of European Overseas History], vol. 12 (2012), pp. 266-269: