

INTRODUCTION



WHEN DID THE MODERN HISTORY of the people known as German Jews actually begin? And how can we delineate the space in which they lived? This volume will explore these questions, which are intertwined with a fundamental problem inherent to all introductions: for the sake of clarity and brevity, it is necessary to generalize. However, as a result, this process may fail to adequately capture the differences in lifeworlds and in regional, social, economic, and demographic factors. I wish to emphasize from the outset that it will not be possible to eliminate this issue entirely. The political, social, and cultural lifeworlds of Germans and German Jews were far too diverse and subject to a vast range of social and economic conditions. For example, while the majority of Prussian Jews lived in towns and cities, Jews in smaller German states and principalities were more likely to live in rural areas. Their legal entitlements varied by region and could differ fundamentally from village to village. These differences persisted into the nineteenth century. Even after German unification, any attempts to make generalized statements about the history of the German Jews run the risk of leveling out differences. This volume's historical overview starts with the late eighteenth century, positioning the era of the early emancipation period at the beginning of the narrative, and it examines the modern history of the German-Jewish minority. Wherever possible, the account will identify consistencies as well as clear structural differences among the lifeworlds of the German Jews from

the late eighteenth to the twentieth century and will point out generalizable principles.

The modern era of German Jews' history began in the final decades of the eighteenth century. It consisted mainly of efforts to redefine the religious traditions or even to abandon them in part while adapting to the conditions of civil equality. Social changes such as deconfessionalization and new notions about the nature of the state created the prerequisites for the subsequent developments. The profound changes that both Jewish and non-Jewish society began to undergo in the mid-eighteenth century are, it is generally assumed, reflected in a treatise published in 1781 by the Prussian state official Christian Wilhelm Dohm (1751–1820). Its title, *Über die Bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (On the civil improvement of the Jews),¹ articulated a kind of slogan describing the process toward civil equality, which was then in its cautious beginnings. One could hardly imagine a more fitting expression of the concerns about the Jewish minority's integration into "German" middle-class society, which was likewise in its incipient stages. Indeed, the German Jews were substantially motivated by the prospect of "improving" themselves and their status. This concept sought for the engaged, hands-on, active participation of Jews, men and women alike, in order to become full-fledged members of society and thus deserving of respect—and consequently, civil equality. A significant aspect of this self-improvement culminated in Jews' remarkable rise into the middle class, their embourgeoisement (*Verbürgerlichung* in German), which will be dealt with further below.

It is striking that similar developments were unfolding in various regions of Europe at that same juncture. In 1781, the Austrian emperor, Joseph II, introduced several legal initiatives aimed at an "improvement of the Jews." Eight years later, the French Revolution would grant Jews complete civil equality for the first time in a European country. In expedited proceedings, Jews became citizens of their country: first Sephardic Jews in the Bordeaux region in 1790 and Ashkenazi Jews in Alsace-Lorraine a year later.

The framework was laid out for the German Jews to gain civil equality step by step, a process designated "emancipa-

tion.” The Jews were not to be granted collective recognition as a “people” or “national minority,” but acceptance as legal subjects of the state was certainly sought. In December 1789, the politician Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre (1747–92) expressed this in the French revolutionary assembly when he articulated a guiding principle of sorts for the movement to grant the Jewish minority equal civil status: “We must deny the Jews everything as a nation and accord them everything as individuals.”²

One peculiarity of the process of achieving civil equality in Germany was “top-down” emancipation: it exclusively involved changes initiated from above, by the state, and not reforms sparked by the citizenry during the course of social change and upheaval, as in France. This led to a fundamental difference: although the German Jews were emancipated as a group, they were expected to earn this new status on a *quid pro quo* basis. It was not the individual Jew who decided for or against emancipation but rather the Jewish minority as a whole. Thus all Jews in Germany, from Jewish university graduates to street peddlers, had to agree to be evaluated in accordance with the same criteria of the bourgeois middle-class lifestyle and value system.

The early efforts toward emancipation, initiated by the ruling elite, followed in the wake of new state regulations. Intertwined with the genesis of modern nation-states, these regulations also sought to include the minorities living within the respective state’s territorial compass and/or to regulate their civic status anew. The autonomy of the Jewish local congregation through the institution of the *Gemeinde* (or official community), an officially privileged autonomy that had existed since the early eleventh century (if not earlier), was to be totally abolished. As the modern state crystallized, anything that might be branded a “parallel society” in contemporary German discourse, possibly having the semblance of a “state within a state,” was to be dissolved in the process of integration. Consequently, by their structure and intentions, the emancipation movements were not primarily oriented toward respecting or recognizing the Jewish minority. Rather, they were geared toward improving the circumstances of bour-

geois middle-class society and ensuring the adaptive inclusion of all its members.

Thus integration was coupled with an educational mission. In order to be transformed from subjects into citizens, according to this approach, Jews first ought to be “improved” and to better themselves. This meant that the Jews were expected to cast off features deemed to be “segregative.” In the private sphere, they would be allowed to maintain their religious practices within the family—akin to members of the two main Christian denominations. However, in public and in everyday civic life, they were expected to adapt to German culture. Concretely, this meant using the German language, for example, and moving away from their traditional, characteristic restriction to certain trades and professions. In short, they were to abandon any attribute that visibly set them apart.

The imperative of embourgeoisement (*Verbürgerlichung*) was the theoretical guideline of emancipation passed down by the ruling elite in tune with this perspective. A substantial majority of the German Jews enthusiastically embraced the promises of the early period of emancipation and contributed in their own ways to building up a new self-definition as a Jewish minority within a German bourgeois polity. At first the process of emancipation unfolded in a regionally limited space. It did not impact all German Jews in equal measure. In fact, many German Jews had not long been situated near the urban centers of power and state authority. Rather, well into the second half of the nineteenth century, the majority of German Jews lived in rural areas. Urbanization commenced much later but was then to become a strong feature of preferred location amongst the Jews.

The revolution of 1848 brought a significant demographic shift in the German population, reflected above all in a rapid process of urbanization. This shift was even more pronounced among the Jewish minority. Jews not only relocated from rural areas into cities, they also emigrated in substantial numbers, particularly to North America. The second half of the nineteenth century was also marked by the social advancement of the Jewish minority. Previously, approximately half of the Jewish population had been classified as living in poverty,

but after the foundation of the German Empire (*Kaiserreich*) in 1871, more than 60 percent of Jews belonged to the upper and middle tax brackets, while less than a quarter were considered poor. To a certain extent, the middle class became the social home of the German Jews. However, the forces that wished to keep the Jews out of German society remained intact, providing the basis for a new form of animosity toward Jews: antisemitism. Yet this basic anti-Jewish attitude was not expressed through violence so much as it was manifest in other forms of social practice. It was experienced specifically in the dynamics of everyday life; and it repeatedly pointed to the still extant barriers blocking the road to middle-class civil society, that is, embourgeoisement, the effective *Verbürgerlichung* and integration of German Jews.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the liberal approaches that blossomed during the 1860s, the notion that emancipation was a reward for successful “reeducation” was increasingly replaced by the view that the emancipation of Jews was simply integral to the achievement of legal equality of all citizens. Grounded on this basic assumption, the Jewish minority built upon their confidence that, as equal citizens who had already surmounted the legal barriers, they would soon be able to overcome the last remaining social impediments in their way. That was expressed in a strong social desire and will for advancement as well as in their eagerness to volunteer for military service at the front alongside their non-Jewish compatriots in World War I. The last formal obstacles to full integration also fell away in the Weimar Republic: the locked door of the civil service was opened to Jews—and thus their recognition as full-fledged German citizens was achieved also on this level. The Weimar Republic was already perceived by contemporaries as a heyday, a veritable “Jewish Renaissance.” This did not mean a retreat into the folds of Jewish identity due to the fear of exclusion but rather a self-confident embrace of one’s own Jewish heritage.

Nonetheless, antisemitic experiences continued to remain an inextricable component of Jewish life, and the short years of the Weimar heyday gave way, even before the Nazi seizure of power, to a mounting sense of insecurity and en-

dangerment, as expressed in numerous personal accounts. The gradual and step-by-step exclusion from society in the years immediately preceding World War II was followed by the persecution, banishment, and murder of German Jewry. Approximately 160,000 of the 500,000 German Jews living in Germany in 1933 lost their lives. Only 15,000 survived in Germany to experience the war's end there.

The vast majority of the Jews who lived in Germany after World War II—or sought to build a new life there—were displaced persons (DPs) who remained in Germany, Jews who were disinclined and/or unable to journey onward to Israel or North America. They had mainly come to Germany from eastern Europe and were also later joined by returnees from Israel. In any case, the legitimacy of Jewish life in Germany had been called into doubt so fundamentally by the reality of Nazi persecution that the umbrella organization of the Jewish *Gemeinden*³ in Germany, the Central Council of Jews in Germany (*Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*), founded on 19 July 1950, also struggled to win international acceptance in its early years, particularly from fellow Jews worldwide.

The breakup of the Soviet Union then led to an undreamt-of upsurge in the Jewish population in Germany: within the short span of a few years after 1990, some 190,000 Jewish Soviet citizens relocated with their families to Germany. Since then, they have come to constitute the majority in the Jewish *Gemeinden* in Germany. This has been supplemented since the turn of the new century by a significant minority of Israelis, who for the most part do not officially belong to the local Jewish *Gemeinden* but have become part of German society and thus also play a role in shaping Jewish life in Germany in the twenty-first century.

Thus, ever since the Enlightenment, Jewish history in Germany and German-speaking countries has been characterized by an oscillating dynamic, buoyed by promises and hopes of integration and buffeted likewise by social rejections and disappointments. Consequently, Jewish existence in Germany was never simply a given, and perhaps this remains true to this day. This introductory volume will focus on this peculiarity as it sets out to illuminate and underscore the specifics of

Jewish history within German history. Wherever possible, the book will shed light on the historical constellations that led to these specificities. Thus, the analysis will not only show the restrictions on Jewish existence in Germany, but it will also consider the full swing of the pendulum and highlight German Jews' agency, their room to maneuver. Despite—or as a direct result of—all the dashed hopes of integration, the Jewish minority developed a multifaceted and multi-layered Jewish life in the country, one might say through sheer force of will.

This volume in the series, an introduction to two centuries of German-Jewish history, bears the title *Everyday Life and Society*. The term “everyday life” reflects the effort to sound out the contextual factors that have shaped the life-world(s) of the Jewish minority in Germany since the onset of the process of emancipation and how the Jews reacted to the changing legal, social, and religious conditions of life. The guiding premise is that the social framework permeates everyday life and thus fundamentally shapes it. With that in mind, the following chapters will attempt to develop a social profile of the Jews as a minority in a society caught up in the throes of modernization, including a consideration of demography, mobility, career choice, education, and participation in cultural life. The social peculiarities of the Jewish population will be examined as well as the trends in social development over the generations since the beginning of the emancipation process and in connection with the general process of social modernization. To begin with, themes such as “assimilation,” “integration,” middle class “embourgeoisement,” and “social advancement,” which are central both to Jewish lived reality and to the scholarship, will be discussed in the context of the changing conditions of modern society.

“Everyday life” is understood here as an echo of powerful historical developments and changed structural frameworks as these manifest in lifeworlds. The aim is to illuminate the impact of groundbreaking changes, such as the various stages in emancipatory legislation, on the circumstances of the German Jews in daily life. The quasi-biographical thematic structure will consider, as much as possible, the varied spheres of everyday life that made up the life situation of the German Jews:

the social conditions of childhood, of learning and schooling, work and home life, activism, the use of leisure time, and social life. Finally, the volume will explore the core issues that likewise shape the lifeworlds of Jewish history: immigration, transit migration, and emigration.⁴

Notes

1. Dohm's title in English is rendered differently in a now standard English translation: *Concerning the Amelioration of the Civil Status of the Jews*, trans. Helen Lederer (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1957), https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage_s.cfm?docpage_id=4246.
2. "Il faut tout refuser aux Juifs comme nation, il faut tout leur accorder comme individus." "Opinions de M. le Cte Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, député de Paris, Le 23 Decembre 1789," in *La révolution française et l'emancipation des Juifs*, vol. 7, *L'Assemblée Nationale Constituante. Motions, discours et Rapports. La Législation nouvelle, 1789–1791* (Paris: Edhis, 1968), 13.
3. The *Gemeinde* is a local Jewish organization unique to central Europe, sometimes rendered in English as *congregation* or capitalized as *Community*. But it can comprise under its wing a number of different synagogal congregations in a single locality. It was created to centralize local Jewish activities and gradually became public corporations under German law, empowered by the government to organize local citywide Jewish communal, ritual, and even social concerns and affairs. Now as before, *Gemeinden* maintain and build synagogues and run a great variety of institutions locally, including social associations, libraries, health facilities, charity funds, youth organizations, and more. Membership dues, collected either by the government on behalf of the Jewish community or by the *Gemeinde* itself, support such communal activities.
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