

Introduction: A Jewish Gaze – Plural and Unique

The tale of the Jews living in Germany could be told as a chapter of Jewish history as well as a chapter of German history. This last option, however, has only rarely been seriously taken up. Despite the fact that history writing concerning the Jews in the German-speaking world of Central Europe has developed from its inception in parallel with the general historiography of that region, attempts to bring the two together were few and far between. In fact, those two branches of history took their professional, academic shape in parallel, according to the teachings of Leopold von Ranke and under a strong Hegelian influence during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Soon, however, Jewish history became a branch of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and long remained a more or less exclusive Jewish domain. While German history developed as part of a new, internationally practiced discipline, concerned with power politics, diplomacy, statecraft in general, and the nation-state in particular, Jewish history, lacking such a powerful political sphere, failed to develop the same interests and was gradually marginalized.

Moreover, German history, not unlike other European historiographies, usually left out most lower-class elements and all minority groups – rich or poor, central or peripheral. To be sure, methodological links between all European historiographies, including the Jewish history writing, continued to exist. Historians – regardless of nationality or denomination – were by the middle of the nineteenth century all dedicated to the effort of reconstructing the past on the basis of authentic documents, and Jewish historians were, naturally, doing the same. But, in the meantime, working on Jewish history alone seemed appealing enough for Jewish scholars, and writing German history focused on themes that seemed both more pressing and more important.

In any case, as academic history began to be written, the majority of Jews whose lives evolved outside the scholarly sphere were probably just as uninterested in it as their non-Jewish counterparts. History was not yet seen as a tool of self-definition and self-presentation. The *Jewish* main

source of identity, like that of most non-Jews, had for generations been one or another religion. Among Christians, even the Reformation, splitting their faith deeper than ever before, at first only strengthened the centrality of religiously based identities in Europe, and it was only later that this same Reformation began to allow the development of some new, fully or partly secularized forms of identity. Thus, in a process that proved to be far from linear, Europeans learned to conceive of themselves not only as men – and women – belonging to a certain religious congregation, but as members of one or another ethnicity, *Volk*, or nationality. In Germany, where, for a variety of reasons, men were becoming ever more strongly attached to relatively small, or so-called particular political units, they soon learned to see themselves as Prussians, Bavarians, or Hanoverians, for instance; not necessarily – and usually not mainly – as Germans. For them, the process of becoming members of a nation or citizens of a single nation-state was even more protracted and more complex than elsewhere on the European continent.

Just as Goethe and Schiller, late in the eighteenth century, could ask “where Deutschland actually was” and claim they “could not find it,”¹ most German-speaking inhabitants of that part of the world were for a long time unsure as to where that Germany lay and whether their loyalty could ever belong to it. Still, even among them, the process of nationalization was gradually fortified and eventually completed. At the same time, questions of Jewish identity, seemingly rather straightforward in the past, became ever more perplexing.

In fact, even during the Middle Ages, as all group definitions were saturated with religious imagery, Jews were also seen as an ethnographically definable group, possessing social and cultural characteristics that went far beyond their religion and its unique moral and behavioral rules. After all, the biblical view of the Hebrews as a folk lay deep in the consciousness of Christian Europe, and, although there was no general agreement as to the actual link between those ancient Hebrews and contemporary Jews, some such link had always been assumed. Then, during the early modern period, German theologians – sometimes called Orientalists or even, more specifically, Hebraists – showed increasing interest in the precise habitus of contemporary Jews, their daily life, and in particular their languages.² By the middle of the eighteenth century, the biblical narrative itself was no longer seen as a purely religious text and began to be treated as a secular, historical source material. One began to

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, *Xenien: Literaturpolitische Distichen*, number 95, “Das Deutsche Reich.”

² For this, see especially Aya Elyada, *A Goy Who Speaks Yiddish: Christians and the Jewish Languages in Early Modern Europe*, Stanford, CA, 2012.

apply to it the new, proto-scientific tools of the day: linguistic scrutiny, early archeology, and the basic anthropological concepts of that time. Thus, Jewish life in contemporary Europe was observed for information concerning the ancient Hebrews and the other way around. An implicit link between the two allowed the drawing of both positive and negative implications for deciding about the status of contemporary Jews, for instance, as this in itself became an ever more fiercely debated topic.

The most influential interpreter of the not-only-religious past of the ancient Hebrews was the philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder. He never doubted the existence of a profound literary corpus produced by them as a folk, though he too, like Voltaire on the other side of the Rhine, despised the Jews of his days, their group characteristics, and their communal life-style. Using the past as part of his arguments, Johann David Michaelis, a much respected Orientalist at the University of Göttingen, insisted that these characteristics, shaped under the burning sun of the vast Middle Eastern deserts, as he claimed, could never be altered, nor could they ever fit life in enlightened Europe or suit the by then quickly evolving German national culture. Parallel to this anti-Jewish trend ran yet another, showing respect for the ancient Hebrews, even using them as an additional prototype in the forming of a budding German nationalism. To be sure, it was the Greeks that served as the main model for Germany, but that was by no means the only one. Jews played a role in the story of Christian salvation, and they could also play a role in the pre-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment narrative of the independent, German folk, the seed of a new nation.³

Interestingly, Jews themselves often believed that they really possessed unique features outside of and beyond their religion. After all, they all shared a joint halachic hierarchy, strict intra-group marriage rules and an extensive system of social solidarity. Since they had always constituted a widely spread diaspora, they clearly saw themselves – and were seen by others – as more than a religion though less than a nationality. By the early nineteenth century, we find Jews in Germany busily writing their history, trying to come to terms with their own complex identity as well as with the various images of themselves, including the many prejudices put forward by others and widespread among their neighbors. In the age of emancipation, with creeping secularization and the upheavals brought about by revolution and industrialization, they too searched for new sources of identity, a new definition of themselves – as a group and as individuals.

³ On this, see Ofri Ilani, *In Search of the Hebrew People: Bible and Nation in the German Enlightenment*, Bloomington, IN, 2018, and the by now classic studies of E. M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*, Cambridge, 1935 and see also Anthony Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant and Republic*, Oxford, 2008.

They – like the non-Jews among whom they lived – needed a new overall view of their past that could help in shaping their future. Each group sought its own unique history, while an ever deeper gap was widening between them. In both cases, mere remembrance, transmitted from generation to generation by prescribed ceremonies and holy texts, was no longer sufficient. Memory of past events now had to be replaced or at least supported by a critical narrative.⁴ Both Christians and Jews were now seeking a presumably scientific narrative, suited to their needs, anchored in original documents, and fitting the climate of a new age. As the nineteenth century proceeded, Jews, just like Germans, sought to establish learned institutions for these purposes, collected documents, published scholarly journals, and tried their hand in writing local as well as overall national histories – each running its own course.

Before this gap between the two historiographies could close, it first became far wider, in fact deeper than could be imagined. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Germans and Jews were separated as never before, and this could not but be reflected in their history writings. Despite some remarkable efforts, the reemerging post-1945 historiography concerning the Jews, especially in West Germany, could not breach this gap. The early volumes of the *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, published in London since 1956 by émigré Jewish scholars, stressed local perspectives and the inspiring tales of outstanding individuals. It expressed the pain of losing the bond with Germany, but did not really reach out in order to restore it.⁵ And non-Jewish historians, who now felt called upon to engage in German Jewish history, concentrated on similar topics, added regional studies of somewhat wider proportions, and only rarely ventured to treat more inclusive, general themes. Even when the focus was on antisemitism, surely a *German* rather than *Jewish* phenomenon, historians tended to target local developments, writing on specific German regions or states, only slowly mapping the whole area.⁶

⁴ On this, see especially Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism*, Hanover, NH, 1994. Also compare Josef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Philadelphia, PA and Seattle, WA, 1982.

⁵ On the history of the Leo Baeck Institute, see Christhard Hoffmann (ed.), *Preserving the Legacy of German Jewry: History of the Leo Baeck Institute 1955–2005*, Tübingen, 2005.

⁶ See Reinhard Rürup, “Die Emanzipation der Juden in Baden,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins*, 114 (1966), 241–300; Arno Herzig, *Judentum und Emanzipation in Westfalen*, Münster, 1973; Steffi Jersch-Wenzel *Juden und “Franzosen” in der Wirtschaft des Raumes Berlin-Brandenburg zur Zeit des Merkantilismus*, Berlin, 1975. For a reevaluation, see Till van Rahden, “History in the House of the Hangman: How Postwar Germany Became a Key Site for the Study of Jewish History,” in Steven E. Aschheim and Vivian Liska (eds.), *The German-Jewish Experience Revisited*, Berlin, 2015, 171–192.

It could have been assumed that in post-war Germany even the non-specialists would no longer be able to bypass Jewish topics in writing German history. The enormity of the catastrophe, brought upon the European Jews by the Nazis, their helpers and helpers' helpers, could not allow such matters to be set aside any longer. In the past, after all, lack of interest in German-Jewish history could be explained by the small, insignificant size of the Jewish minority. Events that were directly related to them, such as mob attacks, public debates on matters of religious dogma, intra-communal strife, or the repeated waves of inner migration and both immigration into Germany and emigration away from it – all were crucial for the tale of Jewish history, but in more general historical texts were for a long time considered negligible. In grand-style German histories of the day, Jews appeared in subsections entitled “demography,” “religion,” or “minorities,” sometimes curiously even under “culture” or “education.” But all these were addenda to the main text, somewhat like extensive footnotes.

This was true even for early treatments of the history of National Socialism. Karl Dietrich Bracher famously wrote the first such scholarly account, but only a small section of his book, *The German Dictatorship*, published in 1969, dealt with the six years of the Second World War and still less – some 12 of 550 pages – with the Holocaust. Significantly, this was not only a German phenomenon. One of the most useful and widely read textbooks on modern Europe, for instance, *Europe since Napoleon*, written by the English historian David Thomson and published in 1961, does not mention more than the mere elementary facts of what was by him still called the Final Solution. In books that were published during the first post-war generation, Jewish experience during the Nazi era remained – at the very best – a separate matter, hardly ever an integral part of the relevant period. Only later, together with other historiographical changes, did a measure of rapprochement between Jewish and non-Jewish history begin to emerge. Younger historians began working on the fate of the Jews in peace and in war, trying to integrate this tale within their own narrative.

Since the last few decades of the twentieth century, particularly important was the growth of a new Jewish historiography in North America. There, as one gradually abandoned the once-so-central concept of a melting pot, one began stressing the role of ethnic minorities, defined now by their so-called hyphenated identity. Like Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, or Polish-Americans, one could now also write about Jewish-Americans, and soon about Jewish-Germans or Jewish-Russians, though still not much about Jewish-Moroccans or Jewish-Iraqis – important topics only later on. The preference of historians during those years for

writing monographs rather than mammoth multi-volume works likewise enhanced the tendency to specialize and thus led to concentration on Jews within a single national context and within one linguistic or cultural setting. Junior historians could now master the sources in a single language, familiarize themselves with the history of one host society, and concentrate on the past of one Jewish community. Last but not least, this approach encouraged practitioners to apply new historical tools, often borrowed from the social sciences, and to do so with facility and expertise.

More than anything, it was the growing importance of social history that finally helped change the old paradigm in the study of the Jewish diaspora. It produced a new narrative, based on a deeper interest in local contexts, eventually undermining the single, simplified line of argument which had been so dominant in past decades. In the spring of 1983, for instance, at a conference dealing with what the pioneering social historian in Israel Jacob Katz then chose to call “*the Jewish model of modernization*,” the fragility of even such a rather limited model soon became apparent.⁷ The study of modernization, long considered the focus of social history, could display important similarities among the various Jewish case studies, but it could not produce a single, coherent model. The affinity of Jews to non-Jews in their various domiciles often seemed now more meaningful than the affinity of Jews among themselves. Social history almost forced the Jewish into the non-Jewish narrative.

At the same time, it was the same social history that weakened the interest in Jewish history as such for almost a whole generation of politically conscious historians and renewed its isolation within the various national historiographies, that of Germany included: “In fact, it was social history, so long dominant in West Germany, that completely lost sight of German-Jewish history,” wrote historian Stefanie Schüler-Springorum in summarizing this phase.⁸ We could sometimes read during these years detailed and sophisticated Jewish histories, significantly in the plural to be sure, but these were neither incorporated within the various relevant histories in general, nor integrated within the German one in particular.

The turn to post-modernity has made us even more aware of such fissures. As new winds began to blow in literary and cultural studies, one was now bound to hear that all modern narratives were far too inclusive and in any case represented only tales of the “establishment,” so to speak. History was always the tale of the white, male, economically

⁷ See Jakob Katz (ed.), *Towards Modernity: The European Jewish Model*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1987.

⁸ See Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, “Non-Jewish Perspectives on German-Jewish History. A Generational Project?,” in Aschheim and Liska (eds.), *The German Jewish Experience*, 193–205, 199.

and politically successful segment of the population, it was now argued. Colonial peoples, as well as some non-European nations – many of whom have had rich and eventful pasts, often intertwining with major affairs in European history – were no more than roughly mentioned in it. Women played no role at all in such “his-story,” unless, of course, they happened to be powerful monarchs, spouses of equally powerful monarchs, or some other exceptional figures. Jews were absent from all of these narratives.

Gender history, indeed, could serve as a model in analyzing the problem of Jewish marginality in history. Beginning as women’s history, the purpose of this new scholarly field was mainly to add a forgotten or neglected chapter to our vista of the past; telling the tale of women, in the hope of saving them from oblivion. But, while doing so, one also wished “to transform the way *all history* was written,” it was added.⁹ In fact, this was clearly reminiscent of Eric Hobsbawm’s earlier claim, promising to write a new social history. He then spoke not only about providing a research platform for the study of workingmen and the lower classes, but also in favor of changing the discipline of history as a whole, reshaping the way it had been written in a radical way.¹⁰

A project of this sort had succeeded only once before, namely in the hands of Karl Marx, whose shifting of focus to the working class and to class struggle had brought about not only the introduction of additional chapters into existing historiographies, but also the construction of an altogether new narrative, a comprehensive alternative to the history written and propagated before him. The appearance of the *new* social history in the later decades of the twentieth century, perhaps the second chapter of this development, may not have figured as a farce, to follow Karl Marx again, but it was surely less comprehensive than the first, and eventually, so it seems, less successful. Marxism gave rise to an altogether different kind of history writing, indeed, based on economic determinism and focusing on a different social milieu. Social history, heavily relying on economic history as well, clearly widened the interest of historians to the tales of lower-class groups, their interrelations, and their political effects, but its limitations soon became apparent. Some felt it was too dry and technical, moving into obscure corners and losing sight of large-scale, mainly political developments. Others remained unconvinced by its disregard for the role of outstanding personalities or for ideas and ideologies.

Women’s history likewise ran under two headings. It wished both to introduce the story of women into the overall narrative of the past and at

⁹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York, 1999, ix.

¹⁰ E. J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” *Daedalus*, 100(1) (1971), 20–45.

the same time to transform and renew that narrative – its premises, methods, and overall direction. In the end, while it did bring the life of that neglected half of humanity somewhat more to the fore, women’s history changed, but changed only marginally, the way one was writing history as a whole. More was apparently needed for such a transformation. The turn to cultural history helped, no doubt; the move from Europe to the global scene proved important too, and the combination of the two *did* bring about a somewhat different kind of history writing today. Could the place of Jews in it be likewise altered? Now that so much has been achieved in studying the history of German Jewry in isolation, with combined history having occasionally been written for some of the chapters along their joint route, this book attempts to tell a complete tale of the two, with many issues left out, to be sure, but with others woven together.

In fact, the book suggests another perspective on German history, observed – this time – through Jewish eyes, from their unique place in German society.¹¹ After all, we are constantly learning to recast the presumably outdated narratives in different contexts and provide new dimensions to familiar themes. Observe Dan Diner’s history of the twentieth century, for instance, seen – as he explains – from a very concrete and unusual perspective. Europe is to be looked at in his book neither from Paris nor from Berlin, neither from London nor from Rome, but from the famous flight of steps in Odessa, site of the 1905 failed Russian revolution.¹² This, moreover, has a clear methodological advantage, too, since on these famous Odessa steps sits, so it seems, a *single imagined* observer, applying a single alternative gaze to the Europe of his time. Women, or, for that matter, Jews, are varied and their gaze varies, too. Women could be of working-class or middle-class origins. Their perspective could reflect their gender, but it could also be disengaged from it and be based on their economic position, their level of education or their unique cultural position. Jews too had never had only one viewpoint or one gaze. Like women, their look could reflect their life in rural or urban environments, while many of them became increasingly “metropolitan” towards the end of the nineteenth century. They could be poor or rich, religious, even orthodox, traditional or secular. Jewish women surely had

¹¹ See and compare now especially with Till van Rahden, “Germans of the Jewish *Stamm*: Visions of Community between Nationalism and Particularism, 1850 to 1933,” and Yfaat Weiss, “Identity and Essential: Race, Racism, and the Jews at the Fin de Siècle,” in Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman (eds.), *German History from the Margins*, Bloomington, IN, 2006, 27–48 and 49–68, respectively.

¹² See Dan Diner, *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century from Europe’s Edge*, Madison, WI, 2007.

a different perspective than Jewish men, and in every period their point of observation would have certainly shifted. Sometimes, it was not even clear: Who actually looked at whom; where, in fact, was this imagined social location occupied by Jews, and what in the end was Jewish about this or that particular kind of look?

Despite these complexities, I suggest that German Jews, taken as a whole, were observing events always from a unique perspective, or at least from yet another unique perspective. They were particularly sensitive to some aspects of the society within which they lived and perhaps negligent of others. At least one aspect of German history often attracted their special attention, namely the inherent ambivalence in the way this society handled a great many themes, its permanent double-faced subtext. Sometimes it was easy to feel the wings of progressive winds, the promise of a better future. At other times, other winds were blowing – reactionary, hateful, even dangerous, and finally disastrous. Not only Jews could observe this duality, of course, but it had for a long time had a particular effect on them, and it is through their eyes that one can observe it particularly well.

During most of the nineteenth century, following the Napoleonic Wars, times were relatively peaceful. But, in times of growing tension, such as during the 1840s or in the pre-1914 years, Jews could, in contrast, be comforted by their sense of achievement and miss the signs of danger. In rare times of domestic conflict, during the 1860s, for instance, *their* fate clearly improved, and while Germany experienced three wars as a prelude to unification, one German state after another completed the legalization of their civil equality. When, towards the end of the 1870s, a new wave of antisemitism erupted, first in Berlin and then, sporadically, elsewhere too, Jews were – just then – energetically climbing up the social ladder and could begin to count their blessings. Despite the animosity, they enjoyed extraordinary success not only in their old traditional economic niches, but now also in culture, science, and the arts. Thus, they often saw another face of Germany, and, following their vision, we too can benefit from applying it.

True enough, that unique Jewish observational point is not always unproblematic. The Jews, unlike many other minorities, moved quickly from a position of relative isolation in pre-modern times to an increasingly more central spot in modern times. Their economic success in Germany and then their rapid entry into the culture of their surroundings have often been commented upon with unconcealed admiration. This, however, could produce a skewed perspective. While individual Jews did, no doubt, experience unusual success, and while only a few of them were poverty-stricken even as early as the middle of the nineteenth century,

a majority remained consistently anchored in the lower middle class, occupied in small-scale commerce, experiencing little or no social mobility. Who then was in the center? Who in the margin? Where were the Jews, as such, located? Did such a common spot exist?

The American sociologist Thorstein Veblen tried to explain the achievements of outstanding Jews by invoking the advantages of their presumed marginality.¹³ Sigmund Freud apparently saw things in this way, too: “Because I was a Jew,” Freud wrote, “I found myself free of many prejudices, which restrict others in the use of their intellect.”¹⁴ However, many successful Jews in Germany of that time did not *feel* marginal and would not have appreciated the possible advantages of such a position. Still, whether they realized it or not, they too must have seen things differently than others; they too had a special angle from which to experience and observe events, and their unique standpoint enables us, in the end, to consider familiar events, structures, and long-term developments in a different light.

I have chosen twelve chronologically ordered chapters of modern German history and tried to reconstruct them by using a Jewish perspective. This, it must perhaps be repeated, is not a Jewish-history book. Nor is it a complete history of Germany. When a number of various Jewish perspectives played some role in a single period, I tried to preserve this array and faithfully represent it, and the effort may have allowed me to tell a different story, woven into a different context. I have also tried to evade the almost inevitable pitfalls in this case, namely that of telling the story from its tragic end backward. While history is to some degree always told from the standpoint of a particular historian backwardly, this can be fatal in this case. Thus, even if I may have only partially succeeded, I will at least have tried to offer my own way of looking at Germany, surely seen from my own point in time, but without letting the tragic chapters of this tale dictate its entire unfolding. In this way, I may perhaps be able to throw *some* new light on the familiar chronicle, perhaps even bring the two histories – the German and the German-Jewish – together, turning them into a single, new narrative.

¹³ See Thorstein Veblen, “Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe” (1919), in Max Lerner (ed.), *The Portable Veblen*, New York, 1950, 467–479.

¹⁴ Ernst L. Freud (ed.), *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, New York 1960, 367.