

## Consumer Culture and the Making of Modern Jewish Identity

Antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as capitalists have hindered research into the economic dimension of the Jewish past. The figure of the Jew as trader and financier dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But the economy has been central to Jewish life and the Jewish image in the world; Jews not only made money but also spent money. This book is the first to investigate the intersection between consumption, identity, and Jewish history in Europe. It aims to examine the role and place of consumption within Jewish society and the ways consumerism generated and reinforced Jewish notions of belonging from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the new millennium. It shows how the advances of modernization and secularization in the modern period increased the importance of consumption in Jewish life, making it a significant factor in the process of redefining Jewish identity.

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# Consumer Culture and the Making of Modern Jewish Identity

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## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix
PART I NARRATIVES OF BELONGING	
1 Producers, Consumers, Jews, and Antisemitism in German Historiography	3
2 Ethnic Marketing and Consumer Ambivalence in Weimar Germany	25
3 The Jewish Question and Changing Regimes of Consumption	66
4 What Makes a Jew Happy? Longings, Belongings, and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism	82
PART II THE POLITICS OF JEWISH CONSUMPTION	
5 Emancipation through Consumption	105
6 Boycott, Economic Rationality, and Jewish Consumers in Interwar Germany	122
7 Advertising National Belonging	144
8 The Consumption of Jewish Politics	153
PART III HOMO JUDAICUS CONSUMENS	
9 The Cost of Being Jewish	175
10 Place and Space of Jewish Consumption	190
11 The World of Jewish Goods	203

12	Spending Power and Its Discontents	218
13	Beyond Consumerism: The Bridge, the Door, and the Cultural Economy Approach to Jewish History	234
	<i>Index</i>	251

## Figures

2.1	Mercedes-Benz advertisement	<i>page</i> 31
2.2	Ad for Kosher Products at the Tietz Department Store in Berlin	34
2.3	Two Advertisement Stamps for Tomor Margarine with Painting by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim	35
2.4	The HAG Ad for the Jewish Press	38
2.5	“Antisemitic tendencies”	41
2.6	Kunerol Ad for Kosher Margarine with Star of David	44
2.7	“No advert without the Mogen Dovid”	45
2.8	Two Examples of Advertising Material for the Convention of the German Innkeeper Association	46
2.9	Mystikum Products with Hexagram Logo	47
2.10	Example of the Visibility of the <i>Bulgaria</i> ’s Logo on the Streets of Dresden	49
2.11	Advertising Poster for <i>Bulgaria</i> Cigarettes Featuring the Hamburg Sport Club Football Players (Hamburger SV)	51
2.12	A <i>Bulgaria</i> Cigarettes Advert from the <i>Völkischer Beobachter</i> , March 25, 1932	52
2.13	Advertisements Collage	58
2.14	“A beautiful holiday brings pleasure and relaxation,” An Advertisement for the Flower Shop Hanisch in Leipzig	64
3.1	Mazola Oil	73
6.1	“Correction”	135
6.2	“Recommendable summer and bath resort”	137
7.1	Marok-Präparate Ad	146
7.2	Ad for Stollwerck Chocolate. The Slogan Says: “10 minutes rest – take Stollwerck gold out!”	147

7.3	Ad for Fry's Cocoa on the title page of "The Jewish Chronicle" Showing a Child Running with a Gun	148
7.4	Dr. Oetker's Call to German Housewives Not to Buy English Products	149
7.5	Palmin Margarine Advert Containing Explicit Racial References	151
8.1	An Advertisement Calling Readers of the <i>CV-Zeitung</i> to Obtain Boeson-Fruchtsaltz, before Coming to the <i>Centralverein</i> General Assembly	154
8.2	The Jewish Wine War: Palwin vs. Bozwin	159
8.3	Adverts for Phönix Life Insurance	168
9.1	An Advert of the Frankfurt Branch of the Carsch Department Store	176
12.1	Captain Webber's Organization Boycott Campaign Certificates	231
12.2	"Stop Persecution. Boycott German Goods. Buy British"	232

## Preface

“Three thousand ducats.” With these words, a figure uniting all that seems repellent about Jews was presented on the world stage. Shylock, the money-hungry Christian-hating usurer of William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, has contributed to the stigmatization of the Jews for centuries.<sup>1</sup> As Shakespeare was writing his play in the late sixteenth century, there were hardly any Jews remaining in England, much less Jewish moneylenders. But it was at this time that the old prejudice linking Jews and money began to receive new significance. Above all, it is in the confrontation between Shylock and Antonio, the actual merchant of Venice, that it becomes clear that it is not the traditional prohibition against money lending that is at issue. Instead, Shakespeare is dramatizing the conflict between two different economic systems.<sup>2</sup> Shylock’s business practices differ sharply from Antonio’s almost chivalric money dealings. Shylock, a product of a then new urban economic nexus, despises Antonio not only because he is a Christian but because “he lends out money gratis and brings down the rate of usance [. . .] in Venice.”<sup>3</sup> Even so, Shylock still admits that “Antonio is a good man.” There is no contradiction in this, and it is not to be understood as a moral double standard. In response to

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Schwanitz, *Das Shylock Syndrom oder die Dramaturgie der Barbarei* (Frankfurt a.M: Eichborn, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Grebanier, *The Truth about Shylock* (New York: Random House, 1962); Martin D. Yaffe, *Shylock and the Jewish Question* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997); Benjamin Nelson, *The Idea of Usury. From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> All quotes are from William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, available on Project Gutenberg [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2243/pg2243.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2243/pg2243.html) (February 11, 2017).



the question whether he heard any imputation to the contrary, Shylock explains: “Oh, no, no, no, no: my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that he is sufficient.” In the world of the financier Shylock, the terms “good” and “bad” are no longer understood as moral concepts; rather, they are used simply as economic categories. In this way, Shakespeare makes us aware of a developing confrontation of his period. The economy was rapidly evolving from a system dominated by barter into a currency-credit system. Shylock is the embodiment of a new value system and economic order that is subjugated to the ethos of individual investment for the sake of profit, which we commonly identify with modern capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

The image of the Jew as a capitalist or precapitalist prototype is deeply anchored in Western consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Both supporters and critics of the capitalist market economy, Jews and non-Jews, share this viewpoint. Even studies of the economic aspects of Jewish life, to a remarkable degree, find it difficult to shy away from the figure of the Jew as trader and financier. What is common to most of these discussions is that they conceive Jews first and foremost as moneymakers, overlooking the no less important dimension of Jews as money spenders.

This book developed from my uneven attempts to move away from this image of the capitalist (predominantly male) Jew and to call attention to the significance of spending – rather than gaining – in the process of redefining Jewishness in the modern period. Being Jewish has always been interconnected with consumption. Jewish dietary requirements, dress prescriptions, as well as the use of special objects for ritual purposes are just a few examples of how Judaism delineates consumer practices as markers of distinction. More often than not, Jewish rabbinical authorities have called upon Jews not to forgo their Jewishness when doing their shopping. Rules and regulations for buying and selling according to Jewish traditions have been prominent features in responsa and other rabbinic literature. Here we find questions regarding apposite Jewish lifestyle as well as the permissibility of specific products for Jewish use, for example, tomatoes or margarine, which were strictly forbidden for observant Jews until the start of the twentieth century. Rabbinic and community authorities urged Jews to display moderation on the marketplace, warning against the devastating implications of ostentatious consumption

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 3–27.

<sup>5</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

for Jewish life. Some rabbis urged Jews to be more aware of the origin of the goods they purchased. Thus, for example, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), one of the leading orthodox rabbinical authorities in nineteenth-century Germany, proclaimed in 1831 that Jews must not buy goods if their origin is unclear, because they might be stolen. That is why he recommended that Jews should not buy things from “a shepherd, a watchman, a man hired by the day or a craftsman, if it is usual for them to steal such things entrusted to their care.”<sup>6</sup> Hirsch allowed the purchase of goods from women, servants, and children only if one could safely establish that they were the owners of the property.

Keeping a Jewish way of life has thus been not merely a matter of religious confession or a form of group or ethnic affiliation. It has also involved a distinctive relationship to various material objects. Such practices require a suitable and supportive infrastructure and commonly involve additional expense for those individuals who wish to live according to Jewish ways. But even for those Jews who don’t actively practice religious Judaism, spending seems to have comprised a significant part of how their Jewishness was perceived and enacted.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the promotion of specific products to Jewish consumers had become an integral part of the marketing strategies of many Jewish and non-Jewish producers and retailers in Europe and across the Atlantic. Before the Great War, for example, one of the largest food manufacturers in Europe, which was owned by the Van den Berghs – a Jewish family from the Netherlands – mass-produced a kosher margarine called *Tomor* for consumers across Europe. Recognizing the special dietary requirements of Orthodox Jews, Van den Bergh promoted *Tomor* as a kosher substitute for butter to meet the needs of kosher households. At the same time, the brand sought to strengthen Jewish identity among what it considered as the growing number of assimilated Jews. Van den Bergh was not the only large-scale producer who acknowledged the existence of a Jewish market. In fact, all over Europe, Jewish and non-Jewish manufacturers produced special products for Jews. Well-known corporations such as Nestlé (Switzerland), Dr. Oetker (Germany), Kaffee Hag (Germany), J. S. Fry & Sons chocolate company (England), Jelen-Schicht soap manufacturer (Austrian/Czech), and Carmel wine (Palestine) launched special campaigns to attract Jewish consumers,

<sup>6</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horev, oder Versuche über Issroëls Pflichten in der Zerstreung, zunächst für Issroëls denkende Jünglinge und Jungfrauen* (Altona: Johann Friedrich Hammerich, 1837), 305–306.

presenting their goods as particularly suitable for Jewish households. This tendency was not confined to the realm of food consumption but entailed, for example, musical recordings and picture postcards featuring synagogues, historical sites, and rabbinical luminaries. Shipping companies such as Lloyd and Hamburg-Amerika-Linie, insurance businesses such as Allianz (Germany) and Phönix Life (Austria), and hotels and recreation resorts all over Europe advertised their services to Jewish consumers. By the early twentieth century, Jewish consumerism had become a crucial part of the Jewish experience, refashioning a Jewish sense of belonging in modern societies.

Only recently have scholars begun to acknowledge the crucial and neglected axis of consumption, identity, and Jewish history. Most notable are works by Andrew R. Heinze, Jenna Weissman Joselit, Marilyn Halter, and Elizabeth H. Pleckon on the role of consumption among Jewish immigrants in America.<sup>7</sup> These studies portray consumption as a crucial vehicle for the integration of Jewish newcomers, yet at the same time they also highlight the significance of consumption as an instrument to preserve and maintain a distinct Jewish sphere in America. Given the importance of consumption in the American way of life, these studies posit that Jews encountered modern consumer culture for the first time in the New World. As this study will demonstrate, this was far from being the case. Jews were already exposed to the new consumer culture in their European countries of origin to such an extent that part of the appeal of America was a result of consumer fantasies about a more comfortable and happy life that Jews already possessed before immigrating.

Leora Auslander's work on the aesthetics of everyday life among Jews in interwar Berlin and Paris is the most substantial published work on Jewish consumer culture in Europe.<sup>8</sup> By exploring lists of personal belongings that were put together by Nazi officials in the process of

<sup>7</sup> Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880–1950* (New York, 1994); Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York, 2000); Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Leora Auslander, “‘Jewish Taste’? Jews, and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Paris and Berlin, 1933–1942,” in: Rudy Koshar (ed.), *Histories of Leisure* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 299–331; *ibid.*, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review* 110 (2005), 1015–1045; *ibid.*, “Reading German Jewry through Vernacular Photography: From the Kaiserreich to the Third Reich,” *Photography and Twentieth-Century German History* 48 (3) (2015), 300–334.

Aryanization, Auslander reconstructs the households of Jewish families in these cities. She finds sizeable differences between the households of Berlin Jews and Parisian Jews, suggesting that in matters of taste there was more in common between these Jews and their non-Jewish environment in each city than between the Jewish communities themselves. Her findings are extremely interesting as they demonstrate how embedded Jews were in their host societies, implying that we should reconsider recent trends in Jewish studies that conceptualize the Jewish past increasingly as a transnational history.

In recent years, we witness a growing interest of research in the involvement of Jews in consumer-oriented trades. Fascinating work on Jews and the department stores, the fashion industry, and retailing business have provided new and important insights on the place of Jews in the emergence of modern consumer culture in Europe and beyond since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> These works, to a large degree, are still preoccupied with Jews mainly as sellers of commodities rather than as consumers of goods. Auslander's pioneering work on Jewish taste in European society, notwithstanding, most research on Jewish consumption sidelines the multifaceted nature of consumption as social and cultural practice, and especially consumption as a means of establishing differences between individuals and groups. It is the purpose of this study to redress this imbalance by showing that consumption was used not only as a vehicle of integration but also as a way to mark out and maintain distinctions between Jews and other moderns. The thirteen chapters of this book will thus seek to demonstrate that it is this interplay between seemingly contradictory processes that determined and shaped the modern Jewish experience.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a framework to conceptualize the cultural meaning of consumption without either collapsing consumer culture into an abstract process of homogenization or reducing it to a reflection of the preexisting social order.<sup>10</sup> The key term for understanding this

<sup>9</sup> Just to name here a few of the more recent studies: Paul Lerner, *The Consuming Temple: Jews, Department Stores and The Consumer Revolution in Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Gesa Kessemeier, *Ein Feentempel der Mode oder Eine vergessene Familie, ein ausgelöschter Ort: Die Familie Freudenberg und das Modehaus "Herrmann Gerson"* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2013); Christoph Kreuztmüller, *Final Sale in Berlin: The Destruction of Jewish Commercial Activity, 1930–1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

social process is “distinction,” a term that captures both the sense of classificatory schemes by which people distinguish between things and the use of these things and their meaning to achieve distinction within social relations. According to Bourdieu, this multifaceted process of classification does not simply imply difference, but is also used to establish hierarchy between groups, socioeconomic classes in particular. This book will seek to employ Bourdieu’s approach to other groups as well and investigate how consumption helped to create and maintain multifaceted identities beyond the social hierarchy of the class society. It will thus underpin social agency, but will also explore Jewish consumer experiences using Jean Baudrillard’s work on the blurring of the relationship between production and consumption in modern times. For Baudrillard, what distinguishes modern consumer capitalism is that it does not only produce goods but also engages in the production of consumers. This shift toward the production of consumers, according to Baudrillard, helped to create a new “postmodern” order in which social reality is no longer defined by either production or consumption, but by the simulation of both.<sup>11</sup> By focusing on the ways and forms in which a Jewish consumer market was identified and bolstered, the following study will seek to historicize Baudrillard’s postulation.

The method of investigation employed in this book therefore has a dual function. It seeks, first, to examine how Jews were perceived and targeted as consumers. And, second, it investigates the role consumer culture played in Jewish life. The sources that will be used for this purpose are visual and printed representations, ranging from advertisements, material on marketing strategies by commercial companies, published scholarly work, as well as diaries, memories, and literary representations. This diverse body of sources was found in archival and special collections in a variety of locations in Germany, Israel, England, and the USA. The study itself is divided into three parts, each consisting of four chapters analyzing several distinct conceptual dimensions of the interplay between consumerism and the question of Jewish belonging. The main focus of this exploration will be Germany in the period between the two world wars. Yet, given the somewhat fragmentary state of the sources and the cultural approach to the topic, this investigation can only be partially confined in time and space. Depending on the topic studied, the discussion will at times branch out from the German interwar context in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the role spending played in modern Jewish history.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of Silent Majority* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 27.

*Preface*

xv

The first part of the book will seek to explore how consumer culture could inspire new readings of the Jewish past. By juxtaposing the different narratives regarding Jews in pre-1933 Germany, Chapter 1 will show how a so-called consumerist perspective on the Jewish experience could move research beyond sterile binary divisions that tend to oscillate between approaches stressing inclusion of Jews and those highlighting their exclusion. Chapter 2 will explore products and services that were promoted to Jewish consumers. Examining the advertisements as well as other marketing strategies designed to allure Jewish consumers will serve as a backdrop for the discussion of the multifaceted relationship between processes of integration and practices that facilitated a sense of distinct Jewish sphere in the special period before the Nazi takeover. Moving from the Old Continent to Jewish communities that had emigrated from Europe to the United States, Chapter 3 will suggest that in different settings, particularly settler societies, consumer culture seems to occupy a more significant position in the social process than in societies that evolved based on the ethos of common origin. Underlining the examination of the Jewish experience in different regions of modernity is the question of whether Jews as individuals or as a community are able to integrate. Historically, the question of Jewish “compatibility” with modernity has given rise to a further, and no less fundamental, question regarding the “nature” of Jewish difference. An exploration of these questions will demonstrate that whereas historically Jews have struggled to combine their distinctiveness with the demand for political and social emancipation, since the Holocaust the very notion of Jewish difference, at least in the United States, has been undermined and as a result more than ever before Jews are preoccupied with the question of how to retain their identity. In this context, Israel seems to comprise a distinct regime of consumption. While initially consumption in the Jewish state served as an integral part of nation-building, in more recent times, consumerism has come to denote a longing to dissolve Israel’s “special situation,” and thus to become a society like all other (consumer) societies. It is an irony of history that while the Zionist topos of “normalization” is still prevalent in Israel today, it does not have the same political connotations as in the past, and is now overtly associated with consumer culture and the quest for a happy and comfortable life. The notion of happiness will be the topic of the final chapter of this section.

Indeed, consumption is not only about identity and the struggle to define and negotiate different notions of belonging. It also represents the wish to maximize pleasure and gain happiness. Chapter 4 will thus discuss

different notions of Jewish happiness and will call attention to the much-neglected issue of Jewish economic sensibilities, especially as they pertain to questions of spending. After examining some of the major debates concerning the nature and place of happiness in Jewish traditional sources, this chapter will analyze conceptions of happiness using Jewish humor as its main source. This discussion will show that Jewish notions of happiness did not differ substantially from other meanings of happiness prevalent at the time. Yet, such similarities notwithstanding, it will be argued, a particularly “Jewish” pursuit of happiness can be identified. The quest for a more comfortable and pleasant life provided Jews simultaneously with a means of envisioning their cultural belonging and helped to maintain a sense of Jewish distinctiveness by appropriating a distinct ethos of spending as Jews.

The second part of the book will discuss the relationship between consumption and politics in the context of modern Jewish political movements. Starting at the end of the eighteenth century with debates over Jewish emancipation, the four chapters of this section will examine both the politicization of consumption and the commercialization of Jewish politics. Chapter 5 will explore the interaction between civil rights and consumption in the struggle for Jewish emancipation. This chapter will explore how the language of free enterprise and consumer choice was part of an effort to imagine and constitute a new phase in Jewish history epitomized by political recognition and social integration. The politicization of consumption as a result of nationalism and antisemitism in pre-Holocaust Europe will comprise the focus of the following two chapters.

In recent years, a number of innovative studies have been published on antisemitism and the marketplace. Most of this research deals with calls to boycott businesses owned by Jews as well as the official means by which Jewish organizations counter such efforts. Much less is known about how Jews as consumers reacted to Jewish exclusion in the marketplace. Chapter 6 will redress this imbalance by discussing the efforts to make Jews and other consumers more conscious of their purchasing power. This exploration will demonstrate how in the interwar period politics informed consumer choices, turning consumption into a highly charged activity. With Chapter 7 we will move away from antisemitism to a brief discussion of how, especially during the Great War, national sentiments became a powerful marketing device turning consumption to a new site of political mobilization. Exploring how Jewish political parties – particularly the Zionist movement – utilized consumption in order to promote their



political agendas will comprise the focus of the final chapter of this section. Here we will see how politics became ever more commercialized. Looking at the Zionist political campaigns, we see that they were grounded in marketing principles such as the branding of political leaders and issues, targeted advertising, and staged media events. With its sophisticated marketing array, the Zionist movement sought to gain political as well as economic capital from the marketplace.

While the first two parts of the book mainly deal with the question of how Jews were conceived and targeted as a discrete group of consumers, the third and final section of the book will seek to explore Jewish perceptions of the question of spending and to give voice to the experiences of Jews as consumers. Based mainly on diaries, memories, and lists of household possessions, the four chapters of this section will deal with questions regarding the costs of being Jewish, the geography of Jewish spending, the world of Jewish goods, as well as the efforts to control and tame Jewish consumers. Gender played a crucial role in these discussions and will also comprise a central thread in the attempt to portray the *Homo Judaicus Consumens*, a term that draws on Joachim Prinz's idea of the strong interlinkedness between Jewishness and humanity in the modern age.<sup>12</sup> Exploring Jewish spending will thus demonstrate how consumer choices constitute a type of "cultural positioning" by which different goods and services took on a Jewish meaning. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate the close interaction between the idea of identity and modernity.

The final and concluding chapter of the book will move beyond consumerism to explore how a cultural economy approach to Jewish history could advance our understanding of the Jewish experience of modern times. Thus, instead of viewing the economy as an ontological (and pre-existing) "other" to culture, this chapter will propose that economic activities be considered performative acts embedded within normative institutional frameworks and cultural practices. This approach maintains that the coherence of any economy as well its ability to function depends on the aptitude of people to interact with each other, to formulate values and norms, and to share symbolic representations. The potential of this so-called cultural economy approach to Jewish history will have become evident in previous sections of the book and will be demonstrated with

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Prinz, *The Dilemma of the Modern Jew* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 200–201.



further examples, proffering novel ways of integrating cultural history into economic history and vice versa.

It should be emphasized that there is nothing definitive in this study. My concerns here are to a large extent heuristic and my conclusions are still provisional. The book contains some obvious omissions, too. Above all, more should have been said on the actual spending habits of Jewish families in the prewar periods. Such information is available in household account books that could be found in different archives and in private possession. Collecting and processing such data is an important task that should be taken in a separate study. The question of how Jews responded to the promotional campaigns aimed at them is another topic that could only be partially addressed in this study, as well as the conspicuous involvement of pioneering Jews in the advertising industry.<sup>13</sup> The realm of Jewish consumer culture is so large and its history so little known that this book has done scarcely more than set out some preliminary markers that will hopefully facilitate the way for more detailed investigations of this important field of historical inquiry.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent stimulating study on the involvement of Jews in the American advertisement industry, see Kerri P. Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men: Advertising and the Design of the American Jewish Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

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It has taken quite some time for this book to emerge. As it was in the making in so many places across the globe for so long, I have accumulated considerable debts to a number of individuals and institutions that have helped shape my work along the way. I owe thanks not only for the support and kindness I have received over the years but also for the constancy and encouragement I needed to bring this research to fruition. Work on this book initially started when I was working with Michael Brenner, Nils Römer, and Anthony Kauders on a Jewish historiography project in Munich. I would like to thank Michael for inviting me to join the historiography project, which was an excellent starting point for me to think about Jews and consumer culture. Together with Nils Römer, I organized the first conference on Jews and consumption in 2006 in London. Over the years, Anthony Kauders read various sections of the book and I would like to thank him again for his invaluable support and wise advice. While still in Munich, I received a postdoc fellowship from the Rothschild Foundation Europe. This award allowed me to conduct the initial research on which the book is based.

At the beginning of 2007, I moved to Melbourne, Australia, with my family. At the University of Melbourne, I was fortunate enough to find myself in an environment that was both nurturing and supportive. In Melbourne, with Catherine Kovesi and Antonia Finnane I cofounded the *Cultural History of Economies Research Hub*, which became a meeting place for an interdisciplinary group of scholars who were interested in developing a cultural approach to the study of economies. I particularly benefited from my conversations with Antonia, Jackie Dickenson, Michael Hau, Helen Davies, and Ian Coller. The University of Melbourne also

granted me an Early Career Research Award, with which I was able to travel to Israel and Germany to continue my research.

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xxi

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