

In and Out of the Ghetto

JEWISH-GENTILE RELATIONS IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND
EARLY MODERN GERMANY

Edited by

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Reflecting on German-Jewish History

JACOB KATZ

The history of modern German Jewry is of exceptionally great interest to scholars as well as more general intellectual audiences. This exceptionality is obviously connected with the tragic end of German Jewry in the course of the Holocaust. True, other European Jewish communities suffered no less than the German Jews, some of them even more. The Polish Jewish community, for example, lost a higher percentage of its members during the German occupation than its German counterpart did under the Nazis. One thinks of German Jewry as having been partly saved through emigration. Yet, as I explained on another occasion, the fate of Polish Jewry at the hands of the Germans was unconnected with its previous history.¹ Its misfortune was brought upon it by external forces. Polish Jewry's doom, therefore, did not create an impulse to trace its earlier history. Not so in the case of German Jewry. Although its doom was likewise unforeseen and unpredictable, the experience of the German-Jewish community was part of a continuous evolution that can be traced, stage after stage, phase after phase, starting with the integration of ghetto dwellers into state and society in the wake of emancipation,² continuing with the vicissitudes of its integration, and ending with the fateful turn it took in the Nazi era, leading to its destruction as a community.³

There is no reason for the historian to be embarrassed by the insight that his or her interest in a certain subject derives from the end result of a historical development. What he or she must avoid, however, is viewing the earlier stages from the perspective of the unforeseen and unforeseeable future. Although interest in a subject may come from the finale, historical understanding has to be gained from its antecedents. I assume that this

1 Jacob Katz, "The Unique Fascination of German Jewish History," *Modern Judaism* 8 (1989): 141–55.

2 On emancipation generally, see Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

3 Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

methodological rule guided the editors of this volume to explore the topic of the history of Jewish–Gentile relations in premodern times, though the main subject matter is the history of these relations in the modern period. For it is true that, although many of the vicissitudes of the Jewish position in modern times can be explained by tracing changing conditions in contemporary society, deeper insights into its nature can be gained only by exploring the residual remains of former times that have been ignored or discounted in contemporary consciousness.

The very fact that at a certain juncture contemporaries viewed themselves as having been liberated from the burden of the past is of course characteristic of the situation. Jews and Gentiles alike, in the last decades of the eighteenth and the early decades of the nineteenth century, witnessed the changing role of religion in the new, enlightened world. Religion's new role supposedly rendered obsolete the previous relations between the adherents of Judaism and Christianity.

Historians have attempted to trace the precursors of this development. They have shown that medieval exclusiveness, which was based on a gap between the dogmas and tenets of the two religions, gradually gave way to a more tolerant attitude. I do not quarrel with these findings. I myself contributed to them in my *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, where I show that on the Jewish side a slow process of amelioration in the judgment of Christians and Christianity took place.⁴ There is, however, a basic difference between a silent and possibly unconscious change of attitude that views itself as still remaining within the bounds of tradition and one whereby a new approach presents itself to contemporaries as an outspoken break with that tradition. In the first case, the change is limited to mental evaluation, without practical consequences. In the second, the new attitude imposes the obligation of social action.

Transcending by far his rabbinical predecessors, Rabbi Jacob Emden evolved a theory about Christianity in the 1760s and 1770s that exempted it from the blemish of polytheism, a blemish derived from the dogma of the Trinity. Rabbi Emden believed himself to be thinking within the terms of Jewish tradition. Accordingly, no tangible consequences were to be drawn from his theory. It did not occur to him that this theory could lead to the justification of intermarriage between Jews and Christians. Being a strict, traditional rabbi, Emden of course upheld all the ritual and dietary restrictions that kept Jewish society apart from the Gentile surroundings.⁵ One or two generations later, when the social barriers between Jews and Gentiles

⁴ Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish–Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford, 1961).

⁵ On Emden, see Katz, *Out of the Ghetto*, 36, 143–5.

broke down, the removal of the blemish of polytheism served as a direct justification for intermarriage. Indeed, it also served as a basis for demands that the Jewish minority merge into the Gentile majority. This development was, of course, accompanied by the rejection of tradition in its entirety, not simply a reinterpretation of a certain part of it.

Similar developments took place on the Christian side. Philanthropic Christians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like Hugo Grotius, condemned the traditional and still prevalent harsh treatment of Jews by the authorities and by the general public. He pleaded for a benevolent approach to the Jews, in the name of Christian love. It was thought that rather than humiliation, such an attitude would lead to the hoped-for turning of Jews toward Christianity. Thus, these so-called philo-Semites retained the Christian vision of the absorption of the Jews after their conversion.

A real revolutionary shift took place only when, in the wake of rationalism and the Enlightenment, religious differences were either entirely discounted or their significance to a large extent minimized. This paved the way for the inclusion of Jews in the secular state and their formal membership in Gentile society. True, there were people who, even at this stage, did not give up the hope of seeing the Jews ultimately become Christians, but they viewed this process only as one of accommodation, not as a precondition for their acceptance.

The belief that the process of accommodation or assimilation would obliterate the differences between Jew and Gentile, at most leaving two mutually tolerant faiths, was shared by Jews and Gentiles alike. The logic behind this view was the fact that the exclusion of Jews in traditional times derived from their religious nonconformity. When religion as such lost its overriding importance and influence, people could easily assume that the members of the two religious communities would now meet on the common ground of pure humanity. What was overlooked in this reasoning, however, was that Jewish religious nonconformity was only the formal, historical ground for the Christian-Jewish division. Religious nonconformity carried with it other aspects of separateness. Jewish traditional society embraced the elements of a full-fledged civilization that was different from that of the Christian environment. Jews used their own literary language – rabbinical Hebrew – and their own unique vernacular – Yiddish. Jews had their own law, the Talmud, and together with the Hebrew Bible in its original language, they served as a cultural means of socialization, initiating every new generation into the national culture. Indeed, until the last third of the eighteenth century no one doubted that Jews, though living amid European nations, represented a unique species, harking from biblical and postbiblical times.

True, experience taught that individual Jews could, in traditional period, divest themselves of these characteristics by converting. This divestment, of course, was part of the psychological effect of religious conversion; it meant the absolute identification of the convert not only with the tenets of his adopted faith but also with all of the values of the society that he joined upon his conversion. It is not for nothing that theologians define conversion as a new birth, for, if it is genuine, it can have the effect of a mutation of personality.

The assumption that, after secularization, laxity or negligence concerning religion would have the same effect as did conversion in the religious age is a misconception that looms behind the expected result of Jewish acculturation and assimilation. For, contrary to conversion, acculturation and assimilation are slow processes, that need the span of generations to do their final work. It is for this reason that Jews, especially in the first phases of assimilation, remained culturally and mentally Jewish, even if indifferent or outrightly antagonistic to their former religion. They may have been ignorant of the Jewish national language, Hebrew – indeed most of them were – and have seemingly exchanged the Yiddish vernacular of their ancestors for High German, but they still retained some residual linguistic peculiarities. We know of the efforts of Jewish educators to eradicate the traces of Yiddish that popped up inadvertently in the speech and writing of their pupils. This was especially likely to happen in intimate conversation between Jews. Years ago, the correspondence between Heinrich Heine and Giacomo Meyerbeer came to light. Here were two active contributors to contemporary European culture – and they were certainly assimilated. Yet in their personal correspondence they resorted to expressions like *nebich*, *risches*, *rosche*, *reschoim* – indicating their particular Jewish intimacy. That Gershon Bleichröder, Bismarck's banker, used Hebrew letters and, no doubt, Jewish idioms in his personal letters to Rothschild in Frankfurt am Main we know from Fritz Stern's biography.⁶

The common Jewish background created an affinity for reciprocity, even when and where there was a conscious attempt to extricate oneself from the confinement of Jewish exclusiveness. I found a telling example of this when dealing with the history of Jewish attempts to be accepted into Masonic lodges. Since its declared intention was to join equal-minded men irrespective of religious background, Freemasonry seemed to offer an ideal opportunity for a Jew to gain entrance into Gentile society. Socially ambitious Jews did indeed try to avail themselves of this opportunity, and in my book

6 Fritz Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (1977; New York, 1979), 135.

upon this subject I described their struggle, which I shall return to later.⁷ Nonetheless, despite the basic principle of the universal openness of Freemasonry, Jews had difficulty being accepted. This could be partially attributed to the prevailing prejudices against Jews, yet at times I found the Freemasons blaming the Jews for behavior incompatible with the spirit of Freemasonry. Members of the lodge were expected to communicate with each other on an equal footing. Jews, so the complaint ran, tended to cluster together whenever they appeared in the lodge, creating a subgroup, a clique. Similar observations were made in other quarters as well. I do not think this accusation was a figment of their imagination with no basis in fact. Jewish historical experience, as well as Jewish concepts and practices, created a mentality functioning as a factor of cohesion among Jews, and thereby as a barrier between them and non-Jews.

Many other tangible factors supported Jewish separateness: family ties, owing to the tendency to marry among themselves; their concentration in certain fields of economic endeavor; and, of course, their formal or informal membership in the Jewish community and Jewish organizations. Most of these organizations were maintained contrary to the assimilationist ideology, which mandated a complete integration of Jews that would efface all traces of their different social physiognomy. A sometimes silent, but at other times noisy, controversy went on between the two parties as to why this was happening. Jews argued that they were unable to give up their occupational activities as well as their particular social situations because many occupations, as well as Gentile social circles, remained closed to them. Their critics, however, attributed this behavior to Jewish clannishness or to other, even more reprehensible Jewish propensities. Both closed their eyes to the sociological rule demonstrated in our generation by Simon Kuznets, that as long as a religious minority retains its religious conformity, even only in a very limited way, it perforce also functions as a separate entity in economic and social contexts.⁸ At any rate, if total assimilation was the goal, it could be expected only over the course of many generations. But both parties on the German scene, the Christians and the Jews, were in a hurry.

Christians, in the age of faith, made every effort to convert the Jews in their midst to Christianity, even though the results of their efforts were disappointing. Nonetheless, they did not give up hope of the ultimate outcome. It was an article of Christian faith that at the end of their days the Jews would give testimony to the truth of Christianity. Being of an irra-

7 Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723–1939* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

8 Simon Kuznets, "Economic Structure and Life of the Jews," in Louis Finkelstein, ed., *The Jews, Their History, Culture, and Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1960), 1597–1666.

tional nature, this belief withstood the effects of disappointment. Now that the expectation of conversion was replaced by the expectation of assimilation, the article of faith became a rationally observable process, and thus the questions repeatedly asked were: Are the Jews on their way to becoming Germans? Have they succeeded in divesting themselves of their Jewish propensities?

On the Jewish side, there were signs of impatience as well. The Jewish press registered with satisfaction every case of Jewish advancement on the way to social integration, censuring at the same time any rebuff of Jews by whatever political or social agency. Occasionally Jews did not limit themselves to protests but tried to respond with action. It is grotesque, for example, to see them struggle to be accepted as invited members of a dancing club, something that happened in Königsberg in the late 1840s.⁹

The best example of active Jewish endeavors to break down the barriers of society, however, is the struggle for admission to the Masonic lodges. This commenced in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when some socially ambitious Jews of Frankfurt am Main and Berlin tried to enter the local lodges and were refused. In Frankfurt, the Jews succeeded in establishing their own lodge, which in principle was open to members of any religion but in fact (with some exceptions) had mostly Jewish members. Their contemporaries therefore aptly dubbed this the *Judenloge*. In the era of liberalism, more and more of the regular lodges admitted Jews, but not all of them did. Moreover, according to the general rule, members of a lodge who showed their membership card in another lodge had to be permitted to enter. Nonetheless, many other lodges refused even visitation rights to Jews. Those who were refused did not refrain from making public scandals of their rejection.

Still, during the liberal era progress was made in admitting Jews until the outbreak of anti-Semitism of the 1870s, when most of the Masonic lodges excluded Jews or made their remaining impossible, because of the anti-Jewish atmosphere. Some of these former Freemasons thought of establishing B'nai B'rith lodges and appealed to the American leadership of this organization to accept as affiliates their German counterparts.

This episode highlights the basic difference between the American and German situations. American Jews, though equal citizens before the law, kept to themselves, as far as social contact was concerned. Those who aspired to be accepted by non-Jewish fraternities or clubs were an exception in America. Although the term "pluralism" had not yet been coined, the

⁹ *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, November 10, 1845, 685–6.

idea of voluntary division of the population according to differing religious, social, or ethnic background served as a guideline for social behavior. In Germany, not only the term was lacking but the concept was absent as well. According to the ideal of liberalism and the concept of the equality of all men, anyone ought to have been eligible for any association. Social units such as lodges, fraternities, clubs, and the many *Vereine* (associations) that were typical of German society, however, were exclusive, not only of Jews but often particularly of them. Knowing this, Jews were embittered, and they had to learn the hard way that voluntary association could not be enforced like formal citizenship. They had to accept the fact that, as descendants of the former pariahs of European society, they still carried the stamp of their forebears.

I am aware of the fact that many colleagues of mine, some of them historians of rank, such as the late Professor Salo Wittmayer Baron, objected to the use of the term "pariah" in the Jewish context, even if it was applied to the characterization of Jews during the ghetto period. Jews were, so the argument runs, not untouchables, nor were they inescapably bound to their original group.¹⁰ They could escape, by conversion. Max Weber, who did apply the term to characterize the Jewish situation in premodern times, was, of course, aware of these qualifications. Nonetheless, he found in the Indian pariahs a model for separated underprivileged groups that performed certain necessary functions for society at large. He therefore accepted the term, ignoring the other features of the Indian pariahs, their untouchability and their absolute confinement to their group. In this limited sense, the term is certainly applicable to the Jews of the ghetto times and before. For Jews were no doubt separate by mutual consent; they were certainly underprivileged and limited to certain economic functions. In my opinion, this application of the term is therefore not wrong, but it does not exhaust the breadth and depth of the situation, especially with regard to the presence of the Jews in a Christian environment, the subject of our concern here.

For the division between the Gentile majority and the Jewish minority was not simply that of two groups belonging to different religions: the religions of the two groups were related to each other in an intimate, and at the same time most entangled, fashion. Christian believers did not simply deny the truth of Judaism; rather they maintained a claim to the allegiance of Jews. As the brethren in flesh of the founder of Christianity, Jews ought to have been the first to accept his message, the core of which was, in effect, the invalidation of Judaism. Christianity espoused an ambivalent atti-

10 See Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1952), 1:23–4, 297.

tude. On the one hand, Christians tolerated Jews, because of their historical connection with Christianity and the hope of gaining their ultimate acknowledgment. On the other hand, Christians felt entitled to keep the Jews in their midst in the pariah situation. Jews, aware of the Christian claim to their conversion potential and knowing about the possible enticement involved, reacted with what psychologists would perhaps define as overcompensation. They maintained an anxious avoidance of contact with any part of the Christian culture saturated with Christian symbols. Thus, despite physical proximity and actual intercourse between the two societies, the result was an ever-widening estrangement between them that served as fertile soil for misjudgment and prejudice. This was therefore not simply a relationship between two ethnic or religious groups who happened to live together but were basically uninterested in each other. Jews were an ever-present subject for Christians, not only on the higher theological level but in the popular imagination as well. The same was true for Jewish interest in the role of the non-Jewish world, though perhaps not particularly qua Christians but more generally as the ruling *goyim* (Gentiles). This almost compulsive preoccupation with each other was, however, not based on mutual observation but on traditional notions and preconceived stereotypes.

As long as the two societies lived in physical proximity but, for all sociological intents and purposes, as two separate societies, these abstract notions about each other did not have much impact upon their practical relationship. With the exception of periodic outbreaks of violence by the majority against the minority, the contact between the two societies was governed by the rules of economic and political exigency. The mental reservations of the Jews concerning the Gentiles, especially Christians, did not prevent Jews from seeking the protection of the current incumbents in power nor from serving non-Jews or anyone willing to pay. The same was also true for Christians. Despite harboring prejudices against the Jews, Christian rulers protected the Jews in their midst and availed themselves of their economic services. The Prussian King Frederick I lent a hand to the publishing of Eisenmenger's *Das entdeckte Judenthum*, a despicable collection of anti-Jewish accusations presenting itself as a repository of Christian tradition and teaching.¹¹ At the same time, it was King Frederick's granting of privileges to the Jews that laid the foundation for the thriving Jewish community in Prussia.

Abstract thinking about each other and their practical attitude toward each other were somehow kept apart, in medieval times. Paradoxically, the

11 Johann Andreas Eisenmenger, *Entdecktes Judenthum*, 2 vols. (Königsberg, 1710). On Eisenmenger, see Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction*, chap. 1.

abstract and the real elements became combined when the barriers between the two societies were pulled down and their possible merger was conceptualized. Now the validity of the traditional concepts concerning each other became the subject of discussion and examination. The very volume of publicistic literature about Jewish emancipation and possible integration, the repetition of the anti-Jewish arguments by their foes, and refutation of these arguments by their friends are telling testimony to the formidable obstacles the Jews entering the Gentile world had to overcome. Ultimately, emancipation – and, in part, also integration – were realized not through reconciliation and mutual understanding but through discarding differences or suppressing them, under cover of abstract ideologies.

The alleged elimination of religious elements through the process of secularization served as a major instrument in this accommodation. What has been overlooked, however, is the fact that even if secularization is capable of expunging the cognitive elements of religion, it cannot uproot the deep-seated emotional sentiments or the ingrained mental traits conditioned by religious belief. Secularized Jews and Christians were still estranged, though they were not aware of the sources of their disagreement. The very fact of dissension was frustrating and confounding, for, according to prevailing ideology, common membership in state and society ought to have eliminated the traces of differing backgrounds and origins. To resolve the riddle, all kinds of theories were evolved on both sides – among them that of racially conditioned propensities, with all its sinister implications.

Turning to the starting point of our deliberation, we may state that whereas in premodern times Jews and Gentiles confronted each other as members of two different groups, each with a corresponding system of concepts and beliefs, in modern times the boundaries between the two societies were blurred, without adequate cognitive or ideological justification. This discrepancy between reality and its reflection in perception goes a long way toward explaining how Jewish society became a target of criticism and, finally, an object of deadly attack and destruction.