Wednesday, June 30

Reading material for

"Jewish life and culture in Germany, the question of identity 19th – 20th Centuries"
The modern German Jew, like other West European Jews, was a new and distinctive creation, the product of eighteenth century Enlightenment thought and nineteenth century emancipatory practice. This, by now, is a historical commonplace. Less familiar is the proposition that the very notion of the Ostjude was similarly the outcome of the modernization of Jewish life and consciousness. East European Jews were held to be loud, coarse and dirty. They were regarded as immoral, culturally backward creatures of ugly and anachronistic ghettos. This view was formulated and propagated largely by West European, and especially German, Jews as a symbolic construct by which they could distinguish themselves from their less fortunate, unenlightened and unemancipated East European brethren.

Such an attitude was encouraged by the implicit dictates of assimilation. Assimilation was not merely the attempt to blend into new social and cultural environments. It was also purposeful, even programmatic, dissociation from traditional Jewish national and cultural moorings. Political equality demanded a new kind of Jew, one whose identity was indissolubly a product of the society that was emancipating him. This marks the birth of the specifically German or English or French Jew. In their eagerness to prove their fitness for equal rights it was necessary for these “new” Jews to demonstrate their differences from the traditional Jews of the ghetto. At least in part, the German Jew was recognizable in terms of what he was not. The “modern” Jew was a new and distinctive creation—but so too was his mirror opposite, his dialectical antithesis, the Ostjude, who was made to embody all those negative traditional traits which German Jews had supposedly overcome. The emergent stereotype of the Ostjude was as much the product of Enlightenment thinking as was German Jewry’s own self-
image. Both ideas had their origins in the drive to modernity; both conceptions were the outcome of the breakdown of traditional Jewish self-understanding and signalled the rise of new modes of cultural perception. One fashioned the other.

This was an entirely new development. Before the penetration of Enlightenment thinking, Jews did not divide themselves (nor were they divided by others) into radically antithetical “Eastern” and “Western” components. Of course, local and regional differences between Jews had always existed but in the pre-emancipation era they were of little structural significance when compared with the overall similarities: Jews everywhere were bound by a common socio-political condition and linked by a shared system of beliefs and attachments. Political events and ideological change had created an unprecedented situation. From about the 1780’s on, Jewish historical development was characterized by a profound fragmentation. On the one hand, Enlightenment and emancipation in the West; on the other, the continuation of political disenfranchisement and traditional Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. These were the terms of discourse employed by and about European Jews well into the twentieth century. It was a polarity which produced a new dialectic in the fabric of Jewish life.

Central to this polarity was the ghetto—both as myth and reality. The idea of the “ghetto Jew” is crucial to any discussion of the disposition of modern Jewish history. It stands at the very center of the relationship between the Eastern Jew and German Jewish identity. By the second half of the nineteenth century the ghetto had become virtually synonymous with the Ostjude. It was this conjunction which provided the stereotype with its ongoing resonance. By their mere existence, unemancipated Eastern Jewry kept the historical memory of the ghetto Jew alive in Germany and elsewhere in Central and Western Europe. But this exclusive identification was relatively new. At the beginning of the century Jews in Germany were still commonly regarded as ghetto Jews. Goethe’s description of the ghetto as he remembered it from his youth in the 1750’s referred to the Jewish quarter in Frankfurt, not to an obscure village in Eastern Europe. His shocked reaction to the dirt, the throes of people, the ceaseless haggling and the ugly German Jewish dialect reflects well the overall Enlightenment perception of the ghetto.

Contemporary discussions were not limited to a definition of the ghetto as an area in which Jews were forced to live by law. The conception was far broader than that. The ghetto referred to the simple fact of Jewish physical concentration regardless of its coercive or voluntary origins and, even more pointedly, to the perception of the separatist culture generated by such concentration. Ghetto became a kind of ontological and epistemological category: increasingly it connoted a certain mode of being, a state of mind. This was a viewpoint by no means limited to opponents of the Jews. Rather the rejection of the ghetto coincided with a progressive political outlook. To this day the phrase “ghetto” conjures up images of isolation, compulsion, narrowness, a form of life dependent upon mutual distrust and antagonism. A medieval remnant, for the liberal minds of the day it highlighted the distinction between progress and reaction, Enlightenment and superstition, even beauty and ugliness.

To a large degree, then, Jewish modernization was conditional upon rejection of the ghetto and the fact that this demand came from progressive forces made the same exercise easier for German Jewry. Indeed, this project of de-ghettoization was enthusiastically undertaken. From 1800-1850 German Jews applied the critique of the ghetto to themselves as well as to other Jews; only when German Jewry was sufficiently confident that its own ghetto inheritance had been overcome did the stereotype of the Ostjude assume its full meaning. Acculturation had to be relatively complete before the synonymity of the Eastern Jew with the ghetto could be made definitive.

What was the substance of German Jewish acculturation? Jews did not integrate into some abstract Volk but into the middle class; assimilation was a form of embourgeoisement and Jews spent much time and energy internalizing the economic, ethical and aesthetic standards of that class. But these standards were mediated in a particular way. As George L. Mosse has demonstrated, the Jewish struggle for emancipation occurred when the peculiarly German ideal of Bildung was at its height. Jews eagerly accepted the ideal and, long after the non-Jewish German middle class had deserted its tenets of rationality, tenaciously clung to it. The notion of Bildung centered on the theme of self-improvement in the form of an integrated conception of “rationality” and “refinement.” A highly non-political idea, Bildung was about the self-cultivation of the “cultured” personality. From that point on—even when events appeared to radically belie this outlook—German Jews maintained their belief in the primacy of culture and reason.

Bildung thus determined the pattern of Jewish acculturation and became the criterion by which traditional Jewish life and culture was judged. Under its exacting standards it appeared that almost all old Jewish habits and modes of sociability had to be discarded. Little illustrates this better than the attitude of the early reformers towards jüdisch-deutsch (Yiddish). This, of course, was the pre-emancipation language of both Eastern European and German Jewry. Enlighteners everywhere opposed this “jargon” as an impediment to local linguistic integration. In Germany, however, the attack was particularly marked
given the derivation of Yiddish from German. Elsewhere Yiddish sounded merely strange; in Germany it was the familiarity that bred contempt. This circumstance encouraged an almost demonic perception of the language. Thus, in 1782 Moses Mendelssohn, who as a youth had himself used the language, declared that Yiddish had "contributed not a little to the immorality of the common man; and I expect a very good effect on my brothers from the increasing use of the pure German idiom." The "jargon" symbolized all the negative Jewish qualities of the past, the very antithesis of Bildung. More and more the traditional ghetto Jew—the language he spoke, the manners he displayed—became identical with Unbildung, the counter-example of what the new German Jew had to become. (Mendelssohn's remarks are typical of that faith in culture which held that immorality could be countered by the correct use of language, that purity of expression would somehow create an ethical personality.)

The modernization of the Jewish self was obviously not limited to the linguistic realm: a generalized middle class gentility became the norm for Jewish behavior. Jewish reformers stressed manners, politeness, refinement and contrasted these modes with the crudity and boorishness of traditional Jewish life. The editor of Sulamith distinguished the common from the noble person in terms of the criterion of aesthetic sensibility. This was not a random choice for it stressed those qualities—feelings for the beautiful in art and nature—which were absent in the ghetto Jew. Assimilation also entailed a change of dress: traditional external badges of distinction had to be removed. That is why the dress of the Ostjuden, the caftan and the sidelocks, came to be regarded both as an embarrassment to the German Jew and a deliberate provocation to the non-Jew.

But the process was still more subtle. Acculturation applied also to a nuanced modulation of tone, a lowering of the decibel level. Writing in 1844, Anton Réé argued that political freedoms and religious reform had not led to any real emancipation. The gulf dividing Jews from non-Jews, he declared, was social in nature and could be bridged only by a fundamental reshaping of Jewish manners and mannerisms. Réé explicitly incorporated "gentility" as an essential Jewish aim: "Es ist doch gar zu ungentil, ein Jude zu sein!" In polite society Jewish characteristics were a source of shame—Réé's diagnosis and solution to the problem of Jewish integration reads like a manual of etiquette, an exercise in impression management. His work is a sustained plea to German Jews to finally cast off all traces of the ghetto past. Manner of speech becomes the key to social acceptance and by "dialect" Réé meant not only the "jargon" itself but also the tone, manner and particular gesticulations Jews used even when speaking German. The entire Gestalt of the ghetto Jew was to be removed.

Nineteenth-century German Jews, then, internalized the general distaste for the ghettos in a particularly urgent and intense way. By the time the westward mass migrations of Eastern Jews began in the 1880's, German Jews were confident that they had succeeded in their own project of de-ghettoization. By then it seemed clear that it was the unemancipated Ostjude who most closely fitted the category of the "ghetto Jew." Locked in narrow Talmudic worlds, eternal shnorers, boorish and dirty, still speaking the despoiled "jargon," the Ostjuden symbolized Unbildung, the incarnation of the Jewish past which German Jews had not only rejected but already transcended.

It must be remembered that we are talking here about myths and images, about the symbolic role Eastern Jews played in German Jewish identity. East European Jews were usually perceived as an undifferentiated mass. This was a misleading and often quite distorted picture: the reality was far more complex and differentiated. But stereotypes are never constructed as refined instruments of social understanding. They serve other, less disinterested, purposes. Yet, for all that, myths do carry a core of reality and there was sufficient substance in both the circumstances and culture of Eastern Jewry to give the stereotype plausibility. It was a stereotype which played an important function in the self-understanding of German Jews. The Ostjuden, geographically bordering Germany and always infiltrating its space and consciousness, became the living reminder to German Jewry of its own recently rejected past and an ubiquitous threat to assimilationist aspirations. At the same time, the Eastern Jew was a convenient foil upon which German Jews could externalize and displace "negative" Jewish characteristics. This dual function of the ghetto Jew—threat and foil—became very clear during the 1880's.

Yet the identification of the Eastern Jew as the ghetto Jew had begun considerably before that date. If German Jewry during the first part of the nineteenth century applied the rationalist critique of the ghetto to itself, it always reserved a special animus for the Jews of Eastern Europe and especially Poland. Often the critique was aimed at the debilitating influence of Polish Jewish teachers who, as a result of their migrations from 1600–1800, had become the dominant influence in German Jewish education. Polish Jewish teachers, one Jewish educational theorist proclaimed in 1812, imported not only sloppy language but also a flawed, backward culture into Germany. While German Jews were straining towards the light, towards science and rationality, these men still purveyed Talmudic sophistry or, even worse. Rabba-
listic superstition. German Bildung was explicitly juxtaposed to Polish Talmudic barbarism or the degenerate fanaticism of Hasidism.

In this manner, if assimilation did not proceed apace, Polish Jewry could be blamed. Even that proto-nationalist, committed Jew, Heinrich Graetz expressed this distaste in words hardly distinguishable from those of the Jew-haters. Polish Jews, he wrote, delighted in deception and cheating: “Against members of their own race cunning could not be well employed, because they were sharp-witted; but the non-Jewish world with which they came into contact experienced to its disadvantage the superiority of the Talmudic spirit of the Polish Jews.” They had a love of “twisting, distorting, ingenious quibbling, and a foregone antipathy to what did not lie within their field of vision.” Their manner of thinking led to a “crabbed dogmatism that defied all logic.” This was clearly a post-Enlightenment perception, one that percolated its way through German Jewry.

By the mid-nineteenth century few German Jews would have disagreed with the appraisal of Galician Jewry made by Der Israelet—that they were sunk in the lowest ethical and spiritual depths, lived in terrible filth and poverty and were ruled by ignorance and superstition. All this, of course, contrasted with the German Jews who were making steady progress and advancing towards the light. This light put the darkness of Polish Jewry into an even more bleak focus. But the main reason for the constant comparison was the reassurance that German Jews had progressed to a point where little connected them with their unenlightened ghetto brethren across the border.

For all that, there were clear limits to the extent of Jewish de-nationalization. The young Abraham Geiger’s “spiritualization” of Judaism, his rigid division of Jews belonging to “civilized” and “uncivilized” nations, his insistence that what “goes on among the Jews living in the uncivilized countries . . . is of trifling importance only,” never really triumphed. Beneath the rhetoric of Jewish dissociation, a stubborn sense of Jewish collective responsibility (if not solidarity) persisted. Traditional forms of mutual aid continued to operate as a real social force. What was new was the rationale for the continuing relationship. German Jews justified their concern for Eastern Jews in terms of the same Enlightenment concerns which had provided the grounds for denationalization in the first place. Aufklärung was both the basis for dissociation and justification for mutual aid. Surely German Jews could apply the same modern goals to their Eastern brethren as they did to themselves? Old traditions of mutual aid could realize new ends: providing Jews everywhere with the same rights would ensure one’s own emancipation and assimilation and thereby reduce the reality of Jewish national solidarity. In this manner, both the imperative of integration and the demands of Jewish conscience seemed to be satisfied. It was a program which orthodox as well as liberal Jews could find acceptable.

The new Jewish mission was to remake Jews in the image of German Bildung. Barbarism had to be combated by Enlightenment and what better version of this was there than the German model? This advocacy of Deutschtum was not simply German nationalism camouflaged in Enlightenment dress. We should not forget that the idea of Bildung was always part of the humanist heritage—German Jews were therefore not indulging in a crude cognitive colonialism. Their arguments must be seen in the correct historical context: they were formulated at a time when German cultural superiority seemed self-evident. Nowhere was this peculiar combination of mission and distaste better expressed than in the numerous works of Karl Emil Franzos (1848–1904). Although forgotten today, his works were extremely popular in his own time. Actually, he did little more than articulate the post-Enlightenment perception of the ghetto in palatable literary form. His writings were more the crystallization than the creation of this attitude. Yet on the eve of the great westward migrations, with the appearance in 1876 of his Aus Halbasiien, he captured a widely diffused sensibility which was to color future liberal Jewish confrontations with their mobile Eastern brethren.

In the stories of Franzos all the defects of the ghetto and the ghetto Jew are catalogued. Written in the didactic mode, there is no attempt to hide the distaste for the religious fanaticism, the treatment of women, the dirt, the superstition. At the same time this didacticism is couched in terms of an obvious commitment: the elevation of those pitiful creatures of the ghetto into a condition of Bildung. Franzos was explicit on this: Germanization was not a matter of political control but a cultural ideal. Deutschtum was the standard by which the nations could measure their own cultural progress. Moreover, if the Eastern Jews were obviously backward this was a product of the even greater backwardness of their hosts. This is the context of Franzos’s famous formulation half-Asia. Half-Asia (Galicia, Romania, Southern Russia, Bukovina) was not merely a geographical designation but a condition of the mind. It referred to a strange amalgam of European culture and Asian barbarism, Western industriousness and Eastern indolence. Ostjuden were half-Asian because they lived within these cultural and political boundaries. They were products of the society in which they lived. It was as part of this analysis that Franzos formulated his much-quoted, ambivalent dictum, “Every country gets the Jews it deserves” ("Denn-Jedes
Land hat die Juden, die es verdient"). This, better than any other pithy statement, summed up the German (Bildung) idea of Eastern Europe and its Jews.

By the 1880's, a century of historical development had created two radically juxtaposed Jewish cultures. Some saw the gap as unbridgeable and the ghetto as a kind of anthropological curiosity:

Whoever desires to experience an ethnological sensation need not venture to the far corners of the world. For that, a day's journey from Berlin will suffice. One need only cross the Russian border to find an almost unknown human type full of mystery and wonder. . . . to look with astonishment at these people with their dirty caftans, the exotic faces which, like ghostly apparitions from times long past, still haunt the modern present.

This, of course, was an extreme formulation. Nevertheless, when Eastern Jewish refugees streamed into the cities of Western Europe, the cultural distance seemed so large that only the philanthropic and paternalist modes appeared possible. The major expression of Jewish commonality was not in the sharing of a great historical tradition but in the provision of social welfare. Middle class German Jews, by and large, related to Ostjuden on the basis of responsibility rather than of genuine feelings of solidarity, more out of compassion than out of a sense of identification. The breakdown of traditional Jewish society had led to the collapse of even the pretense of equality in Jewish relationships.

The German Jewish response to the post-1881 problem of the Eastern Jews' persecution and mass migration was, then, grounded in an old ambivalence. German Jews approached the issue in terms of categories inherited from the nineteenth-century experience. Protective and dissociative modes operated side by side in uneasy alliance. German Jews undertook massive charitable work for the driven Ostjuden—while seeking the most efficacious (and humane) ways to prevent their mass settlement in Germany (an attitude always closely related to the general German antipathy to such settlement). Despite the gulf, perhaps because of it, German Jewish philanthropy attained a level of unprecedented magnanimity. Indeed, to outsiders the reflex of responsibility must have seemed so great, the material aid so large, that special justification seemed to be called for. There was, Franzos admitted, a special relationship between Eastern and Western Jews but this was based upon an essentially "denationalized" Judaism:

We are no longer a uniform People . . . the Jew who lives in the civilized countries is today a German, a Frenchman of the Jewish faith and thank
ence.” Even those Jews less extreme in their outlook viewed the Eastern Jews (both within and outside Germany) in negative and very undifferentiated, simplistic ways.

The German Jewish stereotype of the Ostjude must be regarded as a significant limit of the Jewish liberal-rationalist consciousness. As Peter Gay has pointed out, German Jews energetically rejected collective derogatory generalizations. Many consequently eliminated distasteful and prejudicial expressions like “goy” from their vocabulary. Yet when it came to the Eastern Jews this standard collapsed and the distaste represented “the triumph of uninterpreted experience over cherished principles.” The Ostjuden in Germany seemed again to be reconstructing precisely the transcended past and to embody the principle of a threatening Jewish Sonderleben. The need to critically distance oneself from all this became more important than self-proclaimed humanism or principles. Indeed, given Eastern Jewish insistence on special Jewish characteristics, the dissociation could be rationalized in terms of those principles themselves.

More than ever, the specifically German Jewish sense of identity was based upon the explicit differences which divided the German from the East European Jew. For Ernst Lissauer (author of the famous “Hate Song against England”) this juxtaposition was crucial to his own sense of Jewish self-definition. “Once,” he relates, “as I stood with some fellow Jewish students outside my Berlin school, a man with a Jewish caftan and side-locks came from Friedrich Street station and asked us, ‘Are there no Jews in Berlin?’ And instinctively I answered to myself, ‘No,’ for he meant something else by the word than I did.” Lissauer was not indulging in an exercise of Jewish self-denial but a new and to him fundamental differentiation—the world was divided into cultured German and uncultured Eastern Jews. The famous novelist Jakob Wassermann (1873–1934) graphically described the gulf thus:

When I saw a Polish or a Galician Jew I would speak to him, try to peer into his soul, to learn how he thought and lived. And I might be moved or amazed, or be filled with pity and sadness; but I could feel no sense of brotherhood or even of kinship. He was totally alien to me, alien in every utterance, in every breath, and when he failed to arouse my sympathy for him as a human being he even repelled me.

As with Lissauer, this was not a question of Jewish self-denial but Jewishness defined in its German mode. Wassermann drew a basic distinction between a “Jewish” Jew and a German Jew: “Are those not two distinct species, almost two distinct races, or at least two distinct modes of life and thought?” At times the encounter did lead to a total denial of Jewish identity. When Theodor Lessing, who was raised unaware of his Jewish origins, was told by his classmates that he was a Jew, he was deeply shocked. Upon returning home he asked his mother what a Jew “really” was. Lessing, in his autobiography, describes her response: “Once,” Lessing reports, “on the street, my mother pointed to a man in a caftan and said, ‘There goes a Jew.’ I then concluded that we were not really Jews.”

For some intellectuals, the post-1881 migration induced near hysteria and fear of the Eastern Jewish presence bordered on the paranoia. These anxieties often appeared in general non-Jewish journals. Thus Max Marcus’s 1912 attack against the Ostjuden appeared, significantly, in The Journal of Sexual Science as part of a wider analysis of the prospect of Jewish-Christian intermarriage in Germany. Marcus vehemently opposed all “racial” claims against intermarriage and saw the amalgamation of Jews and Christians through marriage as desirable. But it was not only anti-Semites who were slowing down the process. The process of intermarriage could reach its completion only if the Ostjuden could be legally prevented from entering the country (Grenzsperrung): “These Jews are a disaster for us. . . . they constantly create new barriers. Bring in old ghetto air, and are the greatest danger to the prosperity and harmony of the nations.”

But the attitudes of Marcus and other out-and-out assimilationists were extreme and untypical. The majority of German Jews attempted to fuse their Jewish heritage with their Deutschum rather than exercise it entirely. It was this acceptance of Jewishness, regardless how mild its cultural or religious expression, that accounted for the continuing liberal German Jewish sense of responsibility for the Ostjuden. A nagging sense of commitment remained. Moreover, a degree of nostalgia and sentimentality—a recent analyst has termed this Schmalz Judaism—was always an antitode, however ineffective, to the dissociative drive. A certain admiration for the immersion of the Polish Jew in the tradition, for his spirit in the face of adversity, even for some of the endearing qualities of the despised schnorrer was never entirely absent. The rougher edges of the disdain were softened, humanized by a wide recognition of the Eastern Jewish sense of humor, by an admiration for their wit and gall (hutzpah). Sigmund Freud was quite open about this in his Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905).

For liberal German Jews prior to World War I, however, the relationship could not be conceived in more positive terms than those described above. German Jews felt like Germans and their culture was German culture. They did indeed possess very little which was akin to the “Jewish” culture that characterized life in the East European Jewish world. The liberal Western Jewish relationship to the Ostjude was always contained within the strictly delineated limits of the prevailing
ideology of Jewish denationalization. Ideas of an equal East-West partnership were no part of this scheme and the notion that the East European Jew serve as any kind of a cultural model for Western Jews was viewed as palpably absurd. We must look outside the liberal mainstream if we are to grasp the more positive role which the East European Jew was to play in the evolution and disposition of twentieth-century German Jewish identity.

Any Western Jewish attempt to recapture lost roots in the post-Enlightenment era was bound to bring with it a reappraisal of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Whether negatively or positively conceived, all agreed that the Ostjude was the archetype of Jewishness, the living link in a continuous historical chain of tradition. In that sense, the celebration of the Eastern Jew was always a potential—albeit usually unrealized—element in Western Jewish self-understanding, the positive side of an inbuilt ambivalence. Characteristically, the basic ingredients of later glorifications of the Eastern Jew were outlined, as early as 1822, by that great German Jewish rebel Heinrich Heine. Along with his negative perceptions, Heine voiced the essence of what, years later, was to become the German Jewish "cult" of the Ostjude. After an encounter with the Jews in a Polish village, he wrote of "the nausea I felt at the sight of these ragged creatures." They lived in "pigsties.... jabbered, prayed and haggled." They had degenerated into revolting superstition.... Yet in spite of the barbarous fur cap which covers his head, and the still more barbarous notions which fill it, I esteem the Polish Jew more highly than his German counterpart, even though the latter wear a beaver on his head and carry Jean Paul in it. As a result of rigorous isolation, the character of the Polish Jew acquired a oneness.... The inner man did not degenerate into a haphazard conglomeration of feelings.... The Polish Jew, with his dirty fur cap, vermin-infested beard, smell of garlic, and his jabber is certainly preferable to many other Jews I know who shine with the magnificence of slit-edged government bonds.19

These remarks presciently anticipated future representations of the Ostjude as symbol of premodern, unfragmented wholeness (although these often lacked Heine's qualifying realism). Moreover, Heine foreshadowed the tendency to base the elevation of the Eastern Jew upon a critique of the Western Jew. The cult of the Ostjude always proceeded from a comparative East-West analysis. In this way, the Eastern Jew could become a foil for the shallow, imitative, assimilating Jew of the West. Beginning with Heine this evaluation was usually linked to anti-bourgeois sentiments.

Such attitudes, of course, could not become normative for German Jewry. For emancipation was, as we have seen, integrally linked with the process of embourgeoisement. From about the middle of the nineteenth century on, once German Jews had securely transcended life in their own ghettos, a move towards their rehabilitation did take place. The popular paintings of the artist Moritz Oppenheim, for instance, depicted the ghetto as a refuge of sanctity and spirituality in an otherwise hostile, uncivilized world. In Oppenheim's pictures the ghetto itself underwent embourgeoisement: its dwellers embodied solid middle class virtues. No longer the locus of backwardness, this Gemütlichkeit was also reflected in a new genre of memoirs and stories. Here the German ghettos were evoked with considerably more warmth and sympathy than the early Haskalah literature would have allowed. Leopold Kompert and Aaron Bernstein associated the Bohemian and Posen ghettos of their youth with happy times and positive qualities. Such a reevaluation was possible precisely because it referred to the past, which had been overcome and which therefore allowed for a certain nostalgia. The ghettos of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, could not provide materials for a positive and useable Jewish past because they were not merely literary memories but immediate realities and it was there that most of the conventional evils of ghetto life were deflected. (For more details, see Brothers and Strangers, pp. 247-27 and the perceptive essay by Ismar Schorsch, "Art as Social History: Oppenheim and the German Jewish Vision of Emancipation," in Moritz Oppenheim: The First Jewish Painter [Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1983].) The rehabilitation was real enough but should be seen in perspective. As Schorsch himself has impressively demonstrated in his [as yet unpublished] paper, "The Sefardi Mystique in the Mind of Nineteenth-Century German Jewry" [presented at the International Conference on Germans and Jews, Clark University, October 1983], the nineteenth century German-Jewish search for a legitimate and useable Jewish past overwhelmingly resorted to the Sefardi rather than the Ashkenazi model.) The positive counter-myth of the Ostjude—as a more widespread rather than individual attitude—was thus possible only under different, later conditions: the rise of the Zionist movement, fin-de-siècle German neo-romanticism, and conscious Jewish "post-assimilationism."

More than any other factor it was from the Zionist movement that the impetus towards a radical revision of the Western Jewish perception of the Ostjude developed. To be sure, the German Zionists were a small minority of German Jewry.20 But they were exceedingly vocal and acted as the ideological gadflies of German Jewish life. Zionism, of course, threatened the liberal consensus because it asserted that the Jews, contrary to the premises of Enlightenment and emancipation,
were indeed one nation. It was upon this simple proposition that they advocated a radically reformed relationship between the Eastern and the Western Jew. The national movement, it was proclaimed, would transform the Ostjude from the passive object of philanthropy into the natural and equal historical partner of his Western brother.

Once the national dimension of Jewish existence was accepted it seemed to follow automatically that the relationship of East and West had to be reconsidered fundamentally. Well before Herzl, the "communist rabbi" Moses Hess (1812-1875) understood that this could take place only on the basis of radical self-criticism. The formulation of a Western Zionist identity presupposed a period of secularization and was born with the critique of many assimilationist assumptions and the recovery of a Jewish commitment after a period of estrangement.² Hess's *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862) was far ahead of its time and found almost no echo, yet it marked the beginning of a Zionist intellectual tradition. Western Jews were mercilessly castigated, their denial of Jewish nationality characterized as cowardly and self-defeating ("It is the modern Jew who is the contemptible one . . ."). Hess combined the critique of the Western Jew with a search for more authentic models. The contrast with the more honest, self-respecting Jews of the Eastern ghettos is quite clear. Whereas Western Judaism was shallow, in the East the "kernel" of Jewishness had been preserved. All that was required was the secularization of such forms into the living idea of Jewish nationalism.³ (Hess understood that in the West Zionism would have to take the form of a post-emancipationist reassertion of national identity while in the East a modernization of that same identity was necessary.)

This reclamation of the national dimension, then, entailed Western Zionists in a repudiation—at least in theory—of nineteenth-century liberal attitudes towards the Eastern Jews. Like Heine before him, Herzl noted that the Russian Jews possessed an inner unity lost to their Western counterparts. They were not torn by the temptations of assimilation and were "simple and unbroken." Yet they were on a cultural level quite the equal of the West Europeans. "National" Jews, they were also part of modern culture: "And yet they are ghetto Jews, the only ghetto Jews that still exist."⁴⁵

Over the years this glorification of the Eastern Jew became a quite conscious Zionist "counter-myth" set against prevailing liberal definitions of Jewish identity. The image of the Ostjude as embodiment of Jewish authenticity, exemplar of the spiritual, unfragmented Jewish self, was diametrically opposed to the normative Franzosian idea of the ghetto and the ghetto Jew. The Western Jew. Max Nordau declared in the flush of his initial Zionist enthusiasm, was "an inner cripple" and contrasted his "poisoned" soul with the ghetto Jew who, despite all the poverty and persecution, maintained his integrity and "in the moral sense . . . lived a full life."⁶

This is all correct but it is important to note yet another side of the matter: the founders of Western Zionism and the first generation of German Zionism never entirely overcame the same liberal cultural biases characteristic of the assimilationist Jews whose position they were criticizing. Few doubted that the relationship was to proceed in terms of a Western elite and a compliant Eastern mass.⁷ The familiar patronizing airs were everywhere apparent.⁸ Furthermore, Zionists held that *Galut* (exile) was an unnatural state. In this context, the Eastern ghetto retained its paradigmatic status as a "pathological" form of life. Herzl's explicitly West European formulation of the problem referred basically to Eastern Europe. (It was a perspective with which not only Nordau but all the early leaders of German Zionism such as Max Bodenheimer, Adolf Friedemann and Franz Oppenheimer would have concurred). "Zionism," declared Herzl, "is a kind of new Jewish care for the sick. We have stepped in as volunteer nurses, and we want to cure the patients—the poor, sick Jewish people—by means of a healthful way of life in our own ancestral soil."⁹ Often, Zionism was portrayed as a kind of safety valve for bourgeois German Jewry, a convenient mechanism for removing the ubiquitous threat of invading masses of Ostjuden from German territory.¹⁰

The newly established "national" sense of identity must therefore be seen in a somewhat qualified light. Membership entailed different rights and obligations for Eastern and Western Jews. German Zionists defined their responsibilities in terms of an older liberal philanthropy but applied this now to "national" ends for their Eastern brethren. They refused to universalize the Herzlian analysis and apply it to their own political situation in Germany. Zionism referred to "unfree" Jews. As Adolf Friedemann put it: "West Europeans will mainly provide the organizers for colonization . . . naturally we are not about to initiate a mass emigration of German, French and English Jews."¹¹ So, too, Franz Oppenheimer, for instance, could regard Zionism—physical settlement on the land in Palestine—as a means of abolishing the physical degeneration and oppression of the ghetto.¹² He distinguished himself from liberal Jews because, as he put it, he regarded himself as an "ethnic Jew," proud of his Jewish past and present identity. But this had to be clearly differentiated from the "national" consciousness of the Eastern Jews.¹³

The early Zionists, then, "discovered" the Eastern Jews in specific and partial terms. Their Zionism was certainly an expression of their pride in being Jewish and openly affirming it. But it was not regarded as
in any way antithetical to strongly held feelings of German identity, nor was there any fundamental attempt to indict the presuppositions of the emancipation. On the contrary, the fruits of those historical phenomena were now to be given to the deprived Eastern Jews. This was not mere national philanthropy. Zionism did indeed pave the way for a closer sense of East-West Jewish interdependence.

But the idea that Zionism demanded personal commitment and implied Jewish cultural totality only emerged with the second generation of German Zionism. This radicalized younger generation scandalized their Zionist elders with their belief that Deutschum and Judentum were incompatible and that authentic Zionism involved an act of “uprooting” (Entwurzelung) from diaspora life. Zionism was, they proclaimed, also an internal and spiritual revolution: the call for Jewish renaissance was now transposed from the external and the political to the existential and cultural planes. In this context the “counter-myth” of the Eastern Jew played a central, defining role. Once again the representation of the Ostjude was designed to give the German Jew a new and different picture of himself.

The radical Jewish revival can only be understood as part of a wider neo-romantic German mood. This, of course, explicitly went against the grain of German Jewish traditional middle class rationalism. Overtly “romantic” in emphasis it proposed an alternative to the prevailing positivism. It revived what “rationalism” had repressed. The new emphasis on “myth” and a revised conception of the role of the “unconscious” and the “irrational” in culture facilitated a new appreciation of elements in Jewish life which had previously been castigated. Martin Buber’s transvaluation of the Hasid is perhaps the most dramatic example of this change. But the mood also created a greater receptivity to other aspects of Eastern Jewish culture and identity as well.

Like many other German youth these radical Zionists sought meaningful “rooted” communities capable of regenerating the authentic Volksgeist. But unlike their Zionist elders they argued that genuine incorporation into the German Volk was both impossible and undesirable. On the basis of their Volkisch assumptions they had to find their own people, establish their own national framework. They discovered it in the Eastern ghettos and linked themselves to it through Buber’s “community of blood.” Ostjuden, unlike Western Jews, they argued, were a “real” Volk. In the East was an authentic entity (not a pale adjunct to a foreign culture) replete with its own living, unique forms. Perhaps Buber’s Hasid—vibrant, rooted in community and spiritual values—was the unconscious Jewish answer to the peasant, the ideal figure of the German Volksgeist movement. In any case, for these Zionists the Eastern Jews became a kind of surrogate for the German nation, an alternative framework of identification.

Of course, this celebration of the ghetto tells us more about the ideological predicament and proclivities of these German Jews than it illuminates the realities of ghetto culture. Ostjuden, once again, were a convenient foil by which to express convictions about German Jews. As we have seen, beginning with Heine, the positive representation of the ghetto Jew was always related to a critique of the assimilating Jewish bourgeoisie. This was certainly true for the Zionists but it also applied to non-Zionist intellectuals (such as Frank Rosenzweig and, later in the 1920’s, Alfred Döblin12). Indeed, Franz Kafka, who provided the most famous articulation of this mood, can only be called a Zionist in the loosest sense. His discovery of Eastern Jews classically illustrates the major impulses behind the intellectual search for a post-liberal Jewish identity. Like many of his German contemporaries (Gershom Scholem” is the most well-known but by no means the only instance) Kafka’s Jewish return was to a large extent predicated upon conflict with his parents. Judaism, Ostjuden and Zionism became interesting only because of his father’s frivolous dismissal of such matters: “Had you shown interest in them, these things might, for that very reason, have become suspect in my eyes.”

Kafka’s passionate involvement with the Yiddish theater personalized this relationship. At least in ideological terms personal contact was an imperative of the cult. Speaking of the Eastern Jewish refugees, Buber put it thus:

[W]e shall perceive them, all of them, not merely as our brothers and sisters; rather . . . every one of us will feel: these people are part of myself. It is not together with them that I am suffering; I am suffering these tribulations. My soul is not by the side of my people; my people is my soul.

The problem with this exhortation was that such personal relations were very much the exception rather than the rule. Theory and practice (where the old cultural differences always manifested themselves) seldom merged. Even the theory reflected confusion, for the paradox of the German Zionist revolt against German culture was the fact that it was couched in deeply German neo-romantic terms. The difficulties of establishing personal ties and a cultural community along East-West lines remained unresolved. The glorification of the Ostjude was both a challenge to and a demonstration of the tenacity of German cultural assumptions even amongst the most radically committed Jews.

Yet there were also built-in ideological limits to this counter-myth. Because they advocated the creation of the new Jew in Palestine, the
The East European Jew and German Jewish Identity

younger Zionists could not, by definition, endorse an “empirical” acceptance of East European Jewish life as it was. As Hans Kohn (later to become a renowned historian of nationalism) put it: “We want to revolutionize Jewry, not just Western Jewry, but above all Eastern Jewry.”

It was precisely this rejection, the ultimate dismissal of ghetto life which prompted a small minority of Zionists to withdraw from Zionism in the name of East European Jewry. This was a case where Zionism spawned its own dialectic. Influenced by the Zionist opposition to assimilation and its romantic affirmation of living Jewishness, these intellectuals came to the conclusion that only in the Eastern ghettos did—and could—real Jewish culture exist. A tiny movement, it is nevertheless worth noting, for it constituted the most extreme affirmative option for East-West Jewish relations. Men like Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937) and Fritz Mordecai Kaufmann (1888–1921)—the former from an increasingly Orthodox viewpoint and the latter from a socialist perspective—sought to reconcile modernity with the ghetto and to affirm what both Zionist and assimilationist denied: that really authentic Jewish identity was the Judaism of Eastern Europe.

With these thinkers the inversion of the stereotype of the Ostjude and his putative role in Western Jewish self-definition reached its zenith. Both regarded Yiddish not as a bastardized German but as an autonomous and valuable expression of unique Jewish cultural values. Both accepted the liberal accusation that Kulturjuden were to be found exclusively in the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Unlike the liberals, however, they saw this as a virtue, not a defect. Both took issue with Zionists who sought to create a “mythical” culture of the future while destroying the vibrant national life of the present. Not Eastern Jewry but assimilated, deracinated Western Jewry was the danger and for Western Jews interested in reestablishing their Jewish identity only a total, even sensual, identification with the goals, rhythms and pulsating reality of Eastern Jewish life would render this possible.

Critics labeled these ideas as absurd exercises in “backward assimilation.” Kaufmann, wrote one irate Zionist, proposed “nothing less than the assimilation of West European Jewry to Eastern Europe... trying to create an Ostjude out of a ‘goy’.” “That criticism was probably unaware that a few—quite eccentric and radically unrepresentative— attempts at such conscious cultural demodernization had indeed been attempted. Self-ghettoization, of course, involved changes in language, dress, manners, religious belief. Both Ahron Marcus (1843–1916) and Jiri Langer (1894–1943)—German and Czech respectively—undertook independent but remarkably similar journeys. In the full anthropological sense of the word both went “native” by leaving their familiar bourgeois world and totally immersing themselves in the life of the Eastern ghettos. They “became” Ostjuden. Upon their reappearance in Western society both experienced a kind of culture shock in reverse, a shock shared by their liberal Jewish counterparts. The sight of these Western Jews dressed as archetypal ghetto Jews was the source of both shame and bewilderment and, for our purposes, neatly sums up the outer range of symbolic possibilities which the Ostjude could play in German Jewish self-definition.

From the Enlightenment on, the Ostjude were a vital ingredient in German Jewish self-definition. At one extreme, they acted as the living reminder to German Jewry of its own recently rejected past and an ever-present threat to integrationist aspirations. Ostjudentum served as a convenient foil upon which assimilationist German Jews could displace characteristics labeled both negative and “Jewish.” In the middle of the spectrum was the consistently ambivalent approach to the Eastern Jews—the dissociative commingling with the protective mode. At the other extreme, lay the celebration of the Eastern Jew. The cult was a “counter” movement whose psychological function was an inverted mirror of the myth of the ghetto Jew it so vehemently opposed. For if the creation of the German Jew was dependent upon a negative image of the Ostjude, then the recreation of the German Jew was obviously dependent upon the positive symbolic reconstruction of that despised ghetto neighbor. Such German Jewish representations revealed the “Rorschach” nature of the Ostjude: both the negative and the positive stereotypes tell us more about the nature of German Jewish self-understanding than they illuminate the realities of Eastern Jewry. From Franzos to Buber there is a massive symbolic change in content—but not in underlying function: both are didactic, both employ archetypal (if not stereotypical) language, both address and mirror the world of German Jewry and its needs.

Much of modern Jewish history was conditioned by the rift between emancipated Eastern and emancipated Western Jewry. The existence of the ghetto, both as myth and reality, profoundly influenced the fate and disposition of German Jews in particular. The Ostjude and the “German Jew” were archetypal representations of the dichotomy, the main participants in an unprecedented confrontation marked always by tension, often by intolerance and at times also creativity. Mirror opposites, they remained psychologically bound to each other. Idealized or despised, Ostjuden retained their symbolic resonance because they seemed to live their lives in a distinctively Jewish mode: this “totality” gave to them an Ur quality lost to German Jewry. They satisfied perfectly the requirements of both myth and counter-myth making. Their power as cultural symbols made them essential ingredients of German
Jewish self-definition. Their changing image always reflected the complex and often contradictory face of German Jewry itself.

Notes

1. This essay is based on my book, Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness 1800–1923 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; © 1982 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System). It is an attempt to synthesize and provide a general overview of certain aspects of my book. Given constraints of space I have here only been able to sketch the broad outlines of a very complex development in somewhat crude fashion. For a more developed treatment of all these questions (and some not touched upon in the present essay) the book is indispensable.


3. The expression “Ostjude” only became widespread in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless all the characteristics had been delineated early on and different pejorative names were used until the generic, stereotypical description “Ostjude” was generally applied.

4. For an excellent outline of Jewish traditional life and society see Jacob Katz, Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages (New York, 1971).

5. I explore the significance of this factor for the development of anti-Semitism in an essay called “Caftan and Cravat: The Ostjude as a Cultural Symbol in the Development of German Anti-Semitism” in S. Drescher, D. Sabin, A. Sharlin eds., Political Symbolism in Modern Europe (New Brunswick, 1982).


7. For a sample of these many negative perceptions—a perception apparently shared by the author—see generally Stoffers, Juden und Ghetto.


12. Although his historical analysis is somewhat undifferentiated John M. Cuddihy’s The Ordeal of Civility: Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity (New York, 1974) correctly emphasizes the importance of etiquette in the assimilatory process.


14. See, for example, Abraham Geiger’s attempt to dissuade Ostjuden from wearing this garb in Abraham Geiger’s nachgelassene Schriften, ed. Ludwig Geiger (Berlin, 1875–78), p. 298.

15. See his Die Sprachverhältnisse der heutigen Juden im Interesse der Gegenwart und mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Volkserziehung (Hamburg, 1844).

16. Ibid., p. 40.


18. David Friedländer, Über die Verbesserung der Israeliten im Königreich Polen: Ein von der Regierung daselbst im Jahr 1816 abgefordertes Gutachten (Berlin, 1819) is the classic expression of this as well as a general exposition of enlightened German Jewish attitudes towards Polish Jews that was to last into the next century.

19. Most of the leading reformers and theoreticians of German Jewry shared this attitude, amongst them Leopold Zunz, Abraham Geiger and Marcus Jost. For a typical statement see “Der sogenannte Chassidismus,” Der Israelit VII, no. 22 (May 1866).


24. See the foreword to Franzos, Aus Halb-Asten, vol. I (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1914), pp. xvii–xviii. This had already reached its third edition by that year.

25. Ibid., p. xxv.

26. See Jakob Fromer’s introduction to Solomon Maimon’s Lebensgeschichte (Munich, 1911), pp. 7–8. This is particularly interesting in that Fromer was, like his subject Maimon, a transplant modernized Ostjude. It is worth noting that many key creators of the stereotype, including Franzos, were themselves of Eastern Jewish origin.


31. Ernst Lissauer, “Deutschland und Judentum,” Der Kunstwart XXV, no. 13 (April 1912), p. 7. This differentiation still exerts an unexpected cultural influence. Commenting on the casting of the recent extremely popular televi-
sion production Holocaust, its writer Gerald Green explained: "I wanted a real German family, the equivalent of American Jews who think of themselves first as Americans. We didn’t want Fiddler on the Roof Jews, although they were prime victims of the Holocaust. We were afraid they would vitiate what we were trying to do—appeal to a broad audience." See Time (April 17, 1978), p. 61.


35. Similar ideas can be found in, amongst others, Friedrich Blach, Die Juden in Deutschland (Berlin, 1911), see especially pp. 20–21, 42; Fritz Mauthner in Werner Sombart, (ed.), Judenauten (Munich, 1912) pp. 74–77.


37. See the James Strachey translation of this work (New York, 1963), especially pp. 80–81, 111.


41. See Rome and Jerusalem, translated by M. J. Bloom (New York, 1958), especially the "Fifth Letter" and pp. 34, 37.


47. M. Nordau, "Der Zionismus und seine Gegner" (1898), Zionistische Schriften, pp. 171 ff.


50. This mood is well evoked in "Der XIV Delegiertenitag im Leipzig am 14 und 15 Juni 1914," Jüdische Rundschau, no. 25 (June 1914) pp. 268–69.

51. See George L. Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich (New York, esp. Chapter 3. Of course other currents from the wider Zionist movement also fed into this mood.

52. I have tried to document this as well as the reasons behind Buber’s popularity for German intellectuals in Chapter 6 of Brothers and Strangers.

53. See Vom Judentum (Leipzig, 1913), especially the contributions by Robert Wielisch, Max Brod, Gustav Landauer and Moses Calvary.

54. George Mosse has analysed these assumptions in his pioneering "The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry" in his Germans and Jews: The Right, The Left and The Search for a 'Third Force' in pre-Nazi Germany (New York, 1971).


56. See his Reise in Polen (Olten, 1968) and also the Nachwort by Walter Mosche in this new reprint.

57. See his From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth (New York, 1980), especially pp. 44, 83–84. Chapter 5 generally is relevant.


61. This was very apparent in the experimental East-West co-operative the Berlin Jüdische Volkszeitung. See Scholten’s comments in From Berlin, p. 78 and generally pp. 76–80; Georg Lubinski, "Erinnerungen an das jüdische Volkshaus in Berlin," Der junge Jude (July–August 1930), p. 135.


63. I have distilled these ideas from the relevant essays in N. Birnbam, Ausgewählte Schriften zur Jüdischen Frage (Czernowitz, 1910) and Fritz Mordecai Kaufmann, Gesammelte Schriften (Berlin, 1923).


66. See Jiri Langer, Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries (New York, 1976) and especially the foreword by his brother Frankisek Langer.