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## Reflection, Projection, Distortion

### The “Eastern Jew” in German-Jewish Culture

Since the Enlightenment, the image of the “Ostjuden”, the “Eastern Jews”, has played a crucial role in German Jews’ self-definition. Jews from Eastern Europe were considered backward. This backwardness seemed to endanger the German Jews’ integration into modern society. Therefore, they repudiated the “Ostjuden”. At the same time, there emerged a sense of collective responsibility for their “weaker brothers”. At the start of the 20th century, a positive countermyth was established. The unspoiled nature of the “Ostjuden” was turned into a cult. These clichés revealed more about the self-understanding of the German Jews than the reality of the “Ostjuden”.

The modern German Jew, like other West European Jews, was a new and distinctive creation, the product of 18th century Enlightenment thought, 19th century urban capitalist development, and emancipation.<sup>1</sup> This, by now, is a historical commonplace. Less familiar is the proposition that the very notion of the “Eastern Jew”, or Ostjude, was likewise the outcome of the embourgeoisement of Jewish life and consciousness in Western Europe. The actual expression “Ostjude” became widespread only in the early 20th century, but all its characteristics – negative and positive – had been delineated earlier under different names. Although there were exceptions, East European Jews were generally considered to be loud, coarse, and dirty. Together with a more generalised, negative picture of “the East”, these Jews were often portrayed as immoral, culturally backward creatures of the ugly, anachronistic ghetto. Once German Jewry appeared to undergo modernisation and no longer corresponded to traditional images of strangeness and exclusiveness, unemancipated East European Jewry served as a constant reminder of the presence of the mysterious and brooding ghetto, endowing the stereotype of a fundamentally alien, even hostile culture with life and ongoing resonance. It is

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This essay is partly based upon my book, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923* (Madison 1982). It incorporates some subsequent, significant additions in research and changes in thinking. Readers may also wish to see my essay “The East European Jew and German Jewish Identity”, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 1 (1984).

<sup>1</sup> Michael Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew* (Detroit 1967); Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Emancipation* (New York 1978); Steven M. Lowenstein, “The Pace of Modernisation of German Jewry in the Nineteenth Century”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 21 (1976).

important to note that German “progressives”, Jews and antisemites alike, appeared to repudiate the physical and spiritual characteristics associated with East European Jewish life and conveniently (and misleadingly) embodied in the notion of the ghetto and its Jews. This was the consensual framework around which the contested discourse concerning pre-emancipation East European Jewry unfolded. Neither the Nazi obsession with what Hitler, recalling his strolls through Vienna’s inner-city, had labelled a rather inhuman “apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks”,<sup>2</sup> nor Martin Buber’s or Franz Kafka’s romanticisation of the “Ostjude” as the “authentic”, spiritualised Jew can be understood outside the informing categories and dialectics of this debate.

It comes as no surprise that most antisemites propagated negative views of the ghetto (while of course always linking this to an equally critical demonisation of the “modern” Jew).<sup>3</sup> But why did West European and German Jews do so? Eastern ghettos became a symbolic construct by which emergent Jewry could distinguish itself from their less fortunate, unenlightened, and unemancipated East European brothers. Such an attitude was encouraged by the implicit dictates of assimilation. Integration was not merely the attempt to blend into new cultural and social surroundings. It was also a purposeful, even programmatic dissociation from traditional Jewish national and cultural moorings. In their eagerness to prove their worthiness for equal rights, it was first necessary for West European Jews to demonstrate “self-regeneration” and to establish the difference between themselves and the traditional Jews of the ghetto. The emergent stereotype of the “Ostjude” was therefore as much the dialectical product of Enlightenment thinking as the self-image of modern German Jews. Both notions had their origins in the drive to modernity, and both 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.

## Enlightenment versus Backwardness

The division of Jewry into radically antithetical “Eastern” and “Western” components was a new and historically fateful development. To be sure, local, regional, and even quasi-ethnic differences between Jews had always existed. In the early modern period, “aristocratic” Western Sephardim openly exhibited contempt for many of their Ashkenazi co-religionists.<sup>4</sup> But historical developments after the late 18th century produced a far more profound and fateful fragmentation. The gulf between Enlightenment and emancipation in the “West” and the continuation of political disenfranchisement and traditional culture in the “East” introduced an entirely new dialectic into the fabric of political and cultural life.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Ralph Manheim, trans. (Boston 1971), pp. 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between perceptions of “traditional” and “modern” Jews in anti-Jewish thought and practice is discussed in my essay, “Caftan and Cravat: The Ostjude as a Cultural Symbol in the Development of German Anti-Semitism” in S. Drescher, D. Sabeian, A. Sharlin, eds., *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe* (New Brunswick 1982).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Daniel Schroeter, “From Sephardi to Oriental: The ‘Decline’ Theory of Jewish Civilization in the Middle East and North Africa” in Jeremy Cohen, Richard I. Cohen, eds., *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization: Reassessing an Idea* (Oxford 2008), especially pp. 139-140.

We should remember that the stereotype of the ghetto and the ghetto Jew was not always synonymous with Eastern Jews. The association was relatively new. At the start of the 19th century, Jews in Germany were still commonly regarded as creatures of the ghetto. Goethe's description of the ghetto as he remembered it from his youth in the 1750s referred to the Jewish quarter in Frankfurt, not an obscure village in Eastern Europe. His shocked reaction to the dirt, the throngs of people, the ceaseless haggling, and the ugly "German-Jewish" (jüdisch-deutsch) dialect reflects broader, "enlightened" attitudes.<sup>5</sup> The notion of the ghetto referred not only to an area where Jews were forced to live by law. The concept was far broader than that. It went beyond a place of physical Jewish concentration (whether voluntary or coerced) and referred, more pointedly, to a separatist culture and mentality. "Ghetto" became a kind of ontological and epistemological category, a certain mode of being and state of mind. This was by no means a viewpoint limited to antisemites. Indeed, it was integral to a "progressive" outlook in general. For liberal minds of the day, the ghetto was a medieval relic that highlighted the distinction between progress and reaction, Enlightenment and superstitious backwardness, even beauty and ugliness.<sup>6</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that between 1800 and 1850 German Jewry applied the critique of the ghetto to themselves as well as to other Jews. Only when German Jews believed that they had significantly overcome their own ghetto inheritance, did the stereotype of the "Ostjude" assume its full meaning and function. Acculturation had to be relatively complete before the synonymy of the Eastern Jewry with the ghetto and all it stood for could be made definitive. It was of course through the refining tenets of education and cultivation, i.e. classical German *Bildung*, that German Jews officially built their project of cultural integration and produced their critique of traditional Jewish life and culture.<sup>7</sup> Under these demanding standards, many old Jewish habits and modes of sociability were to be discarded. This is well illustrated by the attitudes of the early reformers towards "Jewish-German", what was commonly referred to as jargon. Thus, in early 1782, even Moses Mendelssohn, who as a youth had himself used this 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".<sup>8</sup> "Jargon" symbolised much of the negative Jewish qualities of the past, the very antithesis of *Bildung*.

The modernisation of the Jewish self was obviously not limited to the linguistic realm: An all-around middle-class gentility increasingly became the norm for Jewish behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Jewish (and non-Jewish) reformers stressed manners, refinement, and

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Stoffers, *Juden und Ghetto in der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Weltkrieges* (Graz 1939), p. 69. The author also quotes numerous other negative perceptions of the ghetto – one apparently shared by the author himself.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Stoffers's book contains innumerable examples of these attitudes.

<sup>7</sup> For the most compelling account of the ways *Bildung* informed German Jewish integration, indeed its new self-conception and very identity, see George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington 1985). At a different level, of course, aspects of a more intimate, less formal culture prevailed.

<sup>8</sup> Mendelssohn to Klein, 29 August 1782 in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften V* (Leipzig 1844), pp. 605-606.

<sup>9</sup> John M. Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York 1974). The author correctly stresses the importance of etiquette and manners in the assimilation process, though many would question his analysis of the role of Jewish intellectuals in the self-subversion of this process.

politeness and contrasted these modes with the crudity and boorishness of traditional Jewish life. Integration also clearly entailed a change of attire: Traditional badges of distinction had to be discarded. Increasingly, the traditional dress of the Ostjuden, the caftan and the side locks, came to be viewed as both an embarrassment to the German Jew and a deliberate provocation to the non-Jew.<sup>10</sup> But the process was even subtler. Acculturation applied also to a nuanced modulation of tone, a lowering of the decibel level, the restraint of gestures. In 1844, the pedagogical reformer Anton Reé argued that real emancipation would ensue not just from political freedom and religious reform, but also through social transformation. Jews had to reshape their manners, mannerisms, and gesticulations fundamentally. Reé's work reads like a tract of impression-management, a sustained plea to German Jews to eliminate all traces of their ghetto past. "Gentility" was incorporated as an essential Jewish aim: "It is all too ungentle to be a Jew!" ("Es ist doch gar zu ungentil, ein Jude zu sein!")<sup>11</sup>

### "Eastern Jews" as Object of Projection

By the time the westward mass migration of "Eastern Jews" got underway in the 1880s, German Jews (at least on the surface) seemed confident that they had succeeded in putting the ghetto behind them. Now, it was the "Ostjude" who embodied the ghetto Jew and Unbildung, the incarnation of the past that German Jews had rejected and transcended. To be sure, we are talking here about stereotypes. The presentation of East European Jews as an undifferentiated mass was always misleading and distorted both in terms of their differentiated geographical, cultural, social, and economic situation as well as their location on the spectrum of modern and premodern<sup>12</sup> – just as the German Jews' presentation of themselves as entirely bereft of older, traditional, and more intimate patterns of behaviour belied a certain persistent reality. But here, we are concerned with the important function that this stereotype played for German Jewry. In non-Jewish circles, the Ostjuden, living on Germany's geographical borders and always infiltrating its space and consciousness, played a crucial role in keeping alive notions of the "traditional" Jew and thus maintained a continuity of the stereotype that National Socialism was later able to appropriate with ease and brutality. At the same time, Ostjuden fulfilled multiple functions in the German Jews' understanding of themselves. In many ways, they appeared to pose a ubiquitous threat to ongoing assimilationist aspirations. For German Jewry, they became a living reminder of its own recently rejected past, at times the source of a bad conscience, and – later – for some a possible foundation for Jewish recovery and reconfiguration. Eastern Jews could henceforth act as a convenient foil for German Jews to externalise and displace "negative" Jewish characteristics or, conversely, to idealise traditional or "national" Jewish qualities that had been lost and rejected.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Abraham Geiger's attempt to persuade East European Jews from wearing this garb in Ludwig Geiger, ed., *Abraham Geiger's nachgelassene Schriften*, (Berlin 1875-1878), p. 298.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Reé, *Die Sprachverhältnisse der heutigen Juden im Interesse der Gegenwart und mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Volkserziehung* (Hamburg 1844), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> For a nuanced, differentiated picture see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington 1983), especially the introduction.

It is not difficult to find shockingly negative portrayals of “Polish” Jews by German Jews and non-Jews from throughout the 19th century. Not untypical was the depictions of Galician Jewry by the newspaper *Der Israelit* as sunk in the lowest ethical and spiritual depths, living in terrible filth and poverty, and ruled by ignorance and superstition.<sup>13</sup> Even historian Heinrich Graetz, both proto-nationalist and committed Jew, berated the Eastern Jews’ Talmudic spirit, their love of “twisting, distorting, ingenious quibbling and a foregone antipathy to what did not lie within their field of vision.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet, at least for German Jews, it is clear, beneath the rhetoric of 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. But now, German Jews justified their concern for their brothers in terms of the same Enlightenment concerns that had provided the grounds for de-nationalisation in the first place. Enlightenment became the basis for both dissociation and justification for mutual aid. For, as German Jews surely argued, they could apply the same modern goals to unemancipated East European Jewry as they had done to themselves. Old patterns of mutual aid could realise new ends: Providing Jews with the same rights would ensure one’s own emancipation, render one’s own integration easier, and thus loosen the grip of a debilitating identification. In this manner, both the imperatives of integration and the demands of Jewish conscience seemed to be satisfied. This was a programme to which most segments of German Jewry could subscribe, albeit with varying emphases.

The new mission was to remake East European Jews in the image of German *Bildung* – a goal of course rejected by most antisemites, who regarded this idea as both undesirable and unrealisable. We cannot simply dismiss this as crude cultural and cognitive colonialism, as German nationalism in Enlightenment trappings. There was much of that, but to reduce this mission to such an extent is to miss its more complex character. In those days, German cultural superiority was widely recognised, self-evident. German Jews and non-Jews thus brought to their East European neighbours a particular blend of mission, sympathetic benevolence, and antipathy.

The numerous works of Karl Emil Franzos (1848-1904) captured this widely diffused sensibility – as epitomised by the title of his 1876 collection *Aus Halb-Asien* [From Half-Asia]. This sensibility was to colour future liberal Jewish confrontations with their mobile eastern brothers. Franzos catalogues all the defects of the Galician ghetto and its inhabitants: the religious fanaticism, the treatment of women, the filth, and the superstition. Yet there is also a certain empathy and a didacticism that serves an obvious commitment: to liberate these Jews from their wretched conditions and elevate them into a state of *Bildung*. For Franzos, who had been born in Podolia and had spent his childhood first in Galicia and then Bukovina, Germandom (*Deutschtum*) was not a matter of political control but a cultural idea, part of the path from darkness to progress.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, if the Eastern Jews were so clearly “backward”, this was a product of the even greater backwardness of the societies in which they lived. This is the context of Franzos’s famous formulation, half-Asia (Galicia, Rumania, Southern

<sup>13</sup> “Galizische Zustände”, *Der Israelit*, 7, 12 (22 March 1846), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews: From the Chmielnicki Persecution of the Jews in Poland to the Period of Emancipation in Central Europe*, 5 (Philadelphia 1895), pp. 5-6 and 206.

<sup>15</sup> See the foreword to Karl Emil Franzos, *Aus Halb-Asien*, 1 (Stuttgart and Berlin 1914), pp. 17-18. By 1914, this had already reached its fifth edition.

Russia, Bukovina), which was as much a state of mind as a geographical location. Ostjuden were half-Asians because they lived within these cultural and political boundaries. It was within this context that one should locate Franzos's much-quoted, ambivalent dictum: "For every country gets the Jews it deserves." ("Denn jedes Land hat die Juden, die es verdient.")

By the 1880s, a century of diverging historical development had created for some observers two radically juxtaposed, perhaps unbridgeable cultures. The ghetto had become a kind of anthropological curiosity. The author and translator Jakob Fromer later wrote:

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 dirty caftans, the exotic faces, which, like ghostly apparitions from times long past, still haunt the modern present.<sup>16</sup>

### Distance, Protection, and Philanthropy

This was to be sure an extreme view. Nonetheless, when Eastern Jewish refugees began streaming into the cities of Western Europe, the cultural distance seemed so great that mainly paternalistic and philanthropic modes of relationship seemed possible. Still, the older ambivalence prevailed; protective and dissociative attitudes and actions operated uneasily side by side. Despite the gulf, perhaps because of it, German Jewish philanthropy attained a level of unprecedented magnanimity. This aid was formally justified in terms of a common religious faith, but the bond was also the result of older habits in which traditions of Jewish mutual concern remained alive.

Indeed, family was a more accurate, even if less invoked model for describing and justifying the relationship between Western and Eastern Jews. This model had the virtue of embracing the emotional and existential dimension, without at the same time threatening Western Jews' sense of Germandom. As journalist Hugo Ganz, put it, members of the same family could belong to different nations. But Ganz alluded to an important, not always acknowledged bond between the Western Jew and Eastern Jew: The caftan Jews, he declared, were simply "the images of our own fathers". This was not an ideological legitimation but instead an admission of a charged, multivalent, psychological fact. Families, according to Ganz, contained inequalities, whereby some members "worked themselves into the brightness, while others had to remain in the shadow of wretchedness". Western members had to help their eastern brothers become more like themselves.<sup>17</sup> For modern and liberal Jews, equal family member-

<sup>16</sup> See Jakob Fromer's introduction to Salomon Maimon, *Lebensgeschichte* (Munich 1911), pp. 7-8. Fromer, like his subject, was a transplanted, modernised Ostjude. It is worth noting that many key creators of the stereotype (and opponents thereof) were themselves of Eastern Jewish origin. Some of the most critical depictions of ghetto life flowed from the pens of Eastern Jewish authors.

<sup>17</sup> "Das ostjüdische Problem", *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, 55, 42 (6 November 1891).

ship was predicated upon the overcoming of a common, debilitating past. This was the source of both the rejection and the responsibility.

For many German Jews, their specific sense of self was of course based upon the explicit difference that they sought to establish between themselves and the East European Jew (while among non-Jewish Germans, a heated debate continued over whether such a difference mattered). More than ever, for many “assimilating” German Jews, their own sense of particular identity was based upon an explicit, even radical distancing of themselves from the East European Jew. The author Ernst Lissauer recalled:

Once, as I stood with some fellow Jewish students outside my Berlin school, a man with a 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.<sup>18</sup>

This was not simple Jewish self-denial, but Jewishness defined in its particular German self-understanding, as opposed to its East European mode. The word was simplistically and stereotypically divided into cultured German and uncultured Eastern Jews. The 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.

Wassermann drew an ontological 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?”<sup>19</sup> An even more radical anecdote comes from Theodor Lessing, who later became very self-critical about these attitudes and turned to a committed, albeit idiosyncratic Zionism: “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.”<sup>20</sup> Yet such attitudes were extreme and ultimately atypical. A certain acceptance of Jewishness, no matter how formulated, accounted for the continuing German Jewish nagging sense of responsibility for their eastern brethren. Nor was this always simply a question of duty. A degree of nostalgia and sentimentality for older, traditional ways, for a bygone manner of life, persisted and was transmitted in everyday attitudes, literature, the popular press, and art.<sup>21</sup> But this was usually most apparent for life within the ghettos of the German cultural realm. German Jews could rehabilitate

<sup>18</sup> Ernst Lissauer, “Deutschtum und Judentum”, *Der Kunstwart*, 25, 13 (April 1912), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Jakob Wassermann, *My Life as a German and Jew*, English translation S.N. Brainin (New York 1933), pp. 196-198.

<sup>20</sup> Theodor Lessing, *Einmal und nie wieder* (Gütersloh 1969), p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> Richard I. Cohen, “Nostalgia and ‘return to the ghetto’: a cultural phenomenon in Western and Central Europe” in Jonathan Frankel, Steven Zipperstein, eds., *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 1992), pp. 130-155.

and aestheticise their own ghettos because they had transcended them, the classic precondition for nostalgia. Although these portraits were not without their critics, their idealised depictions would hardly have been possible in the early literature of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*). Thus Leopold Kompert and Aaron Bernstein associated the Bohemian and Posen ghettos of their youth with happy times and positive qualities.<sup>22</sup> The popular paintings of Moritz Oppenheim depicted the ghetto as a refuge of sanctity and spirituality in an otherwise hostile, uncivilised world. To be sure, the ghetto itself underwent a certain modernising embourgeoisement in his pictures, its dwellers became the incarnation of solid middle-class virtues.<sup>23</sup> Emancipation and respect for the past could be combined. For all that, as Ismar Schorsch has shown, it was not the ghetto of old but rather the accomplished Jews of medieval Spain, the Sephardic experience, to which German Jews increasingly turned as a more suitable model for a legitimate and useable Jewish past.<sup>24</sup>

### The Idealisation of the “Eastern Jews”

Of course, a certain admiration for the immersion of the Polish Jew in tradition, his spirit in the face of adversity, even a kind of begrudging respect for some of the more endearing qualities of the despised beggar, or shnorer, was never entirely absent. The rougher edges of this disdain were softened, humanised by recognition of the Eastern Jews’ sense of humour, their wit and gall (*chutzpah*), and an abiding, if ambivalent attraction to their intimacy and informality as opposed to the mannered constraints and restraints of German *Bildung*. Sigmund Freud amply illustrated this in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).<sup>25</sup> Still, in larger terms, the notion that East European Jewry could serve as a model, as a source of emulation, for modernised Western Jewry would have seemed rather outlandish during most of the 19th century. The positive countermyth of the “Ostjude” – as a more widespread, even institutional, rather than individual attitude – could arise only in the early 20th century under different conditions: the rise of the Zionist movement, fin-de-siècle German neo-romanticism, and a conscious Jewish “post-assimilationism”.

Actually, as early as 1822, that great German-Jewish rebel and poet Heinrich Heine had already outlined the basic elements of later glorifications of the Eastern Jew. But in the 19th century, these were the views of a great dissenter and hardly representative. Nonetheless, because the Ostjude, whether negatively or positively conceived, was regarded as the archetype of Jewishness, the living link in a long tradition, the celebration of the Eastern Jew was always a potential, albeit usually unrealised element, the positive side of an inbuilt Western Jewish ambivalence. Thus, alongside the

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan M. Hess, “Leopold Kompert and the Work of Nostalgia: The Cultural Capital of German Jewish Ghetto Fiction”, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 97, 4 (Fall 2007), pp. 576-615.

<sup>23</sup> Ismar Schorsch, “Art as Social History: Oppenheim and the German Jewish Vision of Emancipation” in Moritz Oppenheim, *The First Jewish Painter* (Jerusalem 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Idem, “The Myth of Sephardi Supremacy”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 34 (1989), pp. 47-66.

<sup>25</sup> For a compelling, but problematic view of the Jewish undermining of civility, see John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York 1974), and the insightful review by Robert Alter, “Manners and the Jewish Intellectual”, *Commentary*, 60, 2 (August 1975), pp. 58-64.



contemptuous remarks – “the nausea I felt at the sight of these ragged creatures” who lived in “pig-sties... jabbered, prayed, and haggled” – Heine also declared after an encounter with Jews in a Polish village:

I esteem the Polish Jew more highly than his German counterpart... 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 gilt-edged government bonds.<sup>26</sup>

These remarks presciently anticipated future representations of the “Ostjude” as a symbol of premodern, un-fragmented wholeness (although these later presentations 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 what was regarded as the shallow, imitative, assimilating Jew of the west. Starting with Heine, this evaluation was typically, perhaps even by definition, linked to anti-bourgeois sentiments. But such attitudes could not become normative until the success of the emancipation project, the desirability of embourgeoisement, and the insistence on Jewish denationalisation began to be questioned seriously. Therefore, only with the Zionist movement did an institutional impetus towards a radical revision of Eastern Jewry develop.

It is true that German Zionists represented only a small minority of German Jewry.<sup>27</sup> But they were exceedingly vocal, and because they threatened the prevailing liberal consensus by arguing that – contrary to the premises of emancipation – the Jews did indeed constitute a nation, they were an ideological nuisance in German Jewish life. It was upon this simple proposition that they advocated a radically reformed relationship between the Eastern Jew and the Western Jew. The national movement, it was claimed, would transform the “Ostjude” from the passive object of philanthropy into the natural and equal historical partner of his western brother. The formulation of a western Zionist identity presupposed a period of secularisation and was from the start linked to the critique of many assimilationist assumptions and the recovery of Jewish commitment after a period of estrangement.<sup>28</sup> Thus, in Rome and Jerusalem (1862), the “Communist rabbi” Moses Hess (1812-1875), a founder of Socialism and a proto-Zionist, had already combined a merciless critique of the “cowardly” and “contemptible” Western Jew with a paean for the more honest, self-respecting Jews of Eastern

<sup>26</sup> Heine to Christian August Keller, 1 September 1822. See Hugo Bieber, ed., Heinrich Heine, *Jüdisches Manifest* (New York 1946), pp. 11-12. Heine later published his “Memoir on Poland”, *Der Gesellschafter* (January 1823). The translation here is from F. Ewen, ed., *The Poetry and Prose of Heinrich Heine* (New York 1948), pp. 690-691.

<sup>27</sup> Even within this minority, many members of German Zionism were themselves immigrants from the east. For a portrait of this movement and its membership, see Stephen Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897-1933: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia 1977).

<sup>28</sup> The preconditions for modern Jewish national self-consciousness are analysed by Jacob Katz in “The Jewish National Movement: A Sociological Analysis” in idem, *Emancipation and Assimilation: Studies in Modern Jewish History* (Farnborough 1972).

Europe. It was there that the kernel of Jewishness had been preserved. All that was required was the secularisation of such forms of Jewish life into the living idea of Jewish nationalism. Hess understood that in the west, Zionism would require a post-emancipationist reassertion of national identity, while in the east a modernisation of this national identity was necessary.

Over the years, this glorification of the Eastern Jew became a rather conscious “countermyth” set against prevailing liberal (as well as various German Orthodox) definitions of Jewish self-understanding. The image of the “Ostjude” as the embodiment of Jewish authenticity, exemplar of the spiritual, un-fragmented Jewish self, was diametrically opposed to previously normative conceptions of the ghetto and the ghetto Jew. The Western Jew, Max Nordau declared while still flush with his initial enthusiasm for Zionism, 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”.<sup>29</sup>

This is no doubt correct. Yet there was another side to 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 criticised. They, too, envisaged the relationship in terms of a Western Jewish elite and a compliant Eastern Jewish mass.<sup>30</sup> The familiar patronising air was often apparent. Moreover, there was a clear limit to the glorification of the Eastern Jew from a classical Zionist standpoint. After all, the Zionists viewed exile (galut) as an unnatural state, and in this context, the eastern ghetto retained its status as a “pathological” form of life. Herzl’s explicitly West European formulation of the problem referred basically to Eastern Europe:

Zionism is a kind of new Jewish cure 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 on our own ancestral soil.<sup>31</sup>

From this viewpoint, Zionism could also be understood as a kind of safety valve for bourgeois German Jewry, a convenient mechanism for removing from German territory the ubiquitous threat of invading masses of Ostjuden.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, early German Zionism did not universalise Herzl’s analysis and apply it to itself, but instead referred primarily to the “unfree” Jews of non-emancipated Eastern Europe. As German Zionist Adolf Friedemann put it:

<sup>29</sup> See Nordau’s famous address to the First Zionist Congress in Arthur Hertzberg, ed., *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (New York 1975), pp. 235-241.

<sup>30</sup> The examples are numerous. See Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften* (Cologne and Leipzig 1909), pp. 311 and 317; Theodor Herzl, “The Solution of the Jewish Question” in *Zionist Writings I* (New York 1975), pp. 25-26. On the attitudes of German Zionist leaders, such as Franz Oppenheimer and Adolf Friedemann, see Kurt Blumenfeld, *Erlebte Judenfrage: Ein vierteljahrhundert deutscher Zionismus* (Stuttgart 1962), pp. 52 and 59.

<sup>31</sup> “The Family Affliction” (1899) in Herzl, *Zionist Writings*, 2: 1898-1904 (New York 1975), p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Max Nordau, “Der Zionismus und seine Gegner” *Zionistische Schriften* (1898), pp. 117-119.

“West Europeans will mainly provide the organisers for colonisation... naturally we are not about to initiate a mass emigration of German, French, and English Jews.”<sup>33</sup>

For Franz Oppenheimer, the distinguished German-Jewish sociologist, Zionism, through physical settlement on the land, would help abolish the physical and degeneration and oppression of the ghetto.<sup>34</sup> Oppenheimer clearly 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. Yet he clearly dissociated this identity and himself from the crucially different cultural and “national” consciousness of the Eastern Jews – and did so in terms of a wider distinction of western culture and eastern barbarism.<sup>35</sup>

### The Myth of the “Eastern Jew”

The early Zionists then “discovered” and recast Eastern Jews – but in a specifically distinguishing and philanthropic manner. While they did pave the way for a closer sense of east-west Jewish interdependence, they were still very far from the idea that Zionism demanded personal, existential commitment and Jewish cultural totality, which was the hallmark of the second generation of German Zionism. These radicalised young Zionists scandalised their elders with the belief that Germandom and Jewishness were ultimately incompatible, and that Zionism entailed an act of “uprooting” (*Entwurzelung*) from diaspora life. Zionism, they proclaimed, was also an internal and spiritual revolution: The call for a Jewish renaissance was now transposed from the external and the political to the existential and cultural planes.<sup>36</sup> It was in this context that the “countermyth” of the Eastern Jew came to play a central, defining role. As always, though the content was now transformed, representations of the “Ostjude” were 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, anti-positivist fin-de-siècle Western and Central European shift in sensibility.<sup>37</sup> These new currents went much against the grain of and provided an alternative to prevailing middle-class rationalist positivism. 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 that had been previously neglected or castigated. Martin Buber’s re-evaluation of the Hasid was perhaps the most dramatic and best-known example of the change at the time.<sup>38</sup> Gershom Scholem’s slightly later project, which

<sup>33</sup> Adolf Friedemann, *Was will der Zionismus?* (Berlin 1903), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Franz Oppenheimer, “Der Aufbau einer Jüdischen Genossenschaftsiedlung in Palästina” in idem, *Erlebtes, Erstrebtes, Erreichtes: Lebenserinnerungen* (Düsseldorf 1964), pp. 281-296.

<sup>35</sup> This remarkable text is to be found in idem, “Stammesbewusstsein und Volksbewusstsein”, *Jüdische Rundschau* 15, 8 (25 February 1910).

<sup>36</sup> “Der XIV Delegiertentag im Leipzig am 14 und 15 Juni”, *Jüdische Rundschau*, 25 (June 1914), pp. 268-269.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Aschheim, *Nietzsche und die Deutschen. Karriere eines Kults* (Stuttgart 1996), Chapters 1, 3, and 4.

<sup>38</sup> On Buber’s remarkable popularity among non-Jewish German intellectuals as well as Jewish

brought mystical, Kabbalistic elements to the dialectical centre of historical Judaism, was also a product of this trend.<sup>39</sup> Such sentiments also clearly created a greater receptivity to other aspects of Eastern Jewish culture and identity as well.<sup>40</sup>

Like many other German youth, these radical Zionists combined nationalism with life philosophy. They sought meaningful, “rooted” communities capable of vitalising and regenerating the authentic national character.<sup>41</sup> But for them, unlike their parents, incorporation into the German Volk appeared to be neither possible, nor for some desirable. Given their nationalist commitment, it was thus necessary to find their own people and establish their own national framework. They discovered this in the eastern ghettos. Ostjuden, 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 unique, living 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 ethno-nationalist (völkisch) movement. At any rate, for these Zionists, the Eastern Jew became a kind of surrogate for the German nation, an alternative framework of identification.

This celebration of Ostjuden (and the related critique of bourgeois Western Jews) tells us more about the ideological predicament and proclivities of these German Jews than it illuminates the realities of ghetto culture. Moreover, it was not limited to Zionists. Intellectuals such as Franz Rosenzweig and, in the 1920s, Alfred Döblin were equally prone to such idealisations.<sup>42</sup> As Rosenzweig euphorically wrote his mother after his wartime encounter with Ostjuden:

The Jewish boys are magnificent and I felt something I rarely feel, pride in my race, in so much freshness and vivacity... I can well understand why the average German Jew no longer feels any kinship with these East European Jews; actually he has very little kinship left; he has become philistine, bourgeois; but I, and people like me, should still feel the kinship strongly.<sup>43</sup>

Franz Kafka’s discovery of Eastern Jews similarly illustrates the major impulses behind the intellectual search for a post-bourgeois, post-assimilationist Jewish identity. Like many of his contemporaries – the philosopher and historian Gershom Scholem is the best known but by no means the only example<sup>44</sup> – Kafka’s Jewish “return” was to

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adherents, see my book *Brothers and Strangers*, Chapter 6.

<sup>39</sup> Idem, “The Metaphysical Psychologist: On the Life and Letters of Gershom Scholem”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 76 (December 2004), pp. 903-933.

<sup>40</sup> One exemplary document of this mood in general and the particular emphasis on Ostjudentum may be found in the anthology, Hans Kohn, ed., *Vom Judentum* (Leipzig 1913), especially the contributions by Robert Weltsch, Max Brod, Gustav Landauer and Moses Calvary.

<sup>41</sup> On the influence of the völkisch idea on these circles and an analysis of the similarities and differences relative to broader German currents, see George L. Mosse, “The Influence of the Volkish Idea on German Jewry” in idem, *Germans and Jews: The Search for a “Third Force” in Pre-Nazi Germany* (New York 1971).

<sup>42</sup> See N. Glatzer, ed., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York 1961), pp. 37-38, 73-74, and 80, and Alfred Döblin, *Reise in Polen* (Olten 1968) and the afterword by Walter Muschg in this reprint.

<sup>43</sup> Letter of 23 May 1918 in Glatzer, *Rosenzweig*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>44</sup> Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth* (New York 1980), Chapter 5.

a large extent predicated upon the conflict with his parents and what he regarded as their hypocritical, bourgeois life. Indeed, Ostjuden and Zionism became objects of interest for Kafka to a large extent precisely because of his father's dismissal of these matters: "Had you shown interest in them", Kafka wrote, "these things might, for that very reason, have become suspect in my eyes."<sup>45</sup> In some moods, Kafka's appreciation of the "Ostjude" went together with his experience of German coldness:

Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could only because the German language prevented it... "Mutter" is particularly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendour, Christian coldness... I believe that it is only memories of the ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word "Vater" is too far from meaning the Jewish father.<sup>46</sup>

The East European Jews incarnated for Kafka this missing warmth. A personalised relationship, at least ideologically, was an imperative of the cult. Buber expressed this when speaking of Eastern Jewish refugees:

We 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 people *is* my soul.<sup>47</sup>

Yet such personal relations were ultimately more the exception than the rule. Contradictions between theory and practice persisted. The very theory of these radical Zionists reflected a certain confusion, for the paradox of their revolt against German culture was itself couched in deeply German neo-romantic terms.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, there were also built-in ideological limits to this Zionist counter-narrative. Given the emphasis on creating a new Jew in Palestine, no empirical acceptance of Jewish life in Eastern Europe as it actually existed could be endorsed. The young Hans Kohn (1891-1971) put it this way: "We want to revolutionise Jewry, not just Western Jewry, but above all Eastern Jewry."<sup>49</sup>

It was precisely this rejection of ghetto life that prompted a small minority of Zionists to withdraw from Zionism in the name of existing East European Jewry. Here Zionism spawned its own dialectic. Influenced by the Zionist opposition to assimilation and its romantic affirmation of living Jewishness, these intellectuals concluded that only in the eastern ghettos did – and could – real Jewish culture exist. Men like Nathan Birnbaum (1864-1937) and Fritz Mordecai Kaufmann (1888-1921) sought in

<sup>45</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letter to his Father* (New York 1965), p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> See the entry for 24 October 1911, Max Brod, ed., Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1913*, (New York 1965), p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> See Buber, "Judaism and the Jews" (1909), in *On Judaism*, N. Glatzer, ed. (New York 1967), p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> See Scholem's critique of the Jüdisches Volksheim in Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, pp. 76-80, and Georg Lublinski, "Erinnerungen and das jüdische Volksheim in Berlin", *Der junge Jude* (July-August 1930), p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> Kohn, ed., *Vom Judentum*, p. 17.

different ways to reconcile modernity with the ghetto and to affirm what both Zionists and assimilationists denied: that authentic Jewish identity was ultimately the Judaism of Eastern Europe. Though a tiny movement, it is worth mentioning, for it constituted the most extreme glorification of the Eastern Jew.

### “Eastern Jews” and the Self-Definition of German Jews

What kind of picture emerges from all these developments? From the Enlightenment onwards, “Eastern Jewry” constituted a vital element in German Jewish self-definition, identity, and culture. At one extreme, the East European Jews acted as a living reminder to German Jewry of its own recently rejected past and were an ever-present threat to its integrationist aspirations. The “Ostjude” served as a convenient foil for modernising German Jews to displace characteristics labelled both negative and “Jewish”. In the middle of the spectrum was a consistently ambivalent approach to the Eastern Jews – a dissociative commingling with the protective mode. At the other extreme lay the celebration of the Eastern Jew. Almost a cult, here was a “countermovement”, 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 obviously depended on the positive symbolic reconstruction of that same despised ghetto neighbour.

Such German Jewish representations revealed the function of the Ostjuden as a “Rorschach” inkblot test: The negative and 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 – as well as gentile perceptions of Jewry – was conditioned by the rift between unemancipated 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 “Eastern Jew” 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 occasionally by creativity as well. Mirror opposites, they remained psychologically bound to each other. Idealised or despised, Ostjuden retained their symbolic resonance because they seemed to live their lives in a distinctively Jewish mode: This “totality” gave them an ur-quality lost to German Jewry. They satisfied perfectly the requirements of both myth and countermyth making. Their power as cultural symbols made them essential elements of German Jewish self-definition. Their changing image reflected the complex and contradictory face of German Jewry itself.