

On the
EVE

THE JEWS OF EUROPE
BEFORE THE
SECOND WORLD WAR

Bernard Wasserstein

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INTRODUCTION

A spectre haunted Europe in the 1930s—the spectre of the Jew. Simultaneously feared and despised as a Christ-killer, a devil with horns, subversive revolutionary and capitalist exploiter, obdurate upholder of an outmoded religion and devious exponent of cultural modernism, the Jew was widely regarded as an alien presence. Increasingly excluded from normal society and extruded from common human fellowship, the Jew was transmogrified from fellow citizen into bogey, a subhuman, at best an inconvenience, eventually almost everywhere a hunted beast. Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, this was true not just in those areas of Europe already directly ruled by the Nazis but over the greater part of the continent.

In the 1920s the European Jews had presented the appearance of a vibrant, dynamic, and flourishing people. For the first time in their history they were recognized as citizens in every country in which they lived. Especially in western Europe and the Soviet Union, an ambitious, meritocratic middle class was rapidly climbing the social ladder. The best-educated ethnic group in Europe, Jews shone in all fields of science, dazzled in the theater and literature, and constituted the beating heart of musical life. But this book does not rehearse what are often called the “contributions” of Jews to European culture and society in this period. That is a familiar story.

Within the short space of two decades a dramatic change transformed the Jewish position. By 1939, two years before the Nazi decision to commit genocide, European Jewry was close to terminal collapse. In much of the continent Jews had been deprived of civil rights and were in the process of being turned into outcasts. The demographic outlook was bleak, heading in a downward spiral toward what some contemporaries forecast would be “race suicide.”

The great mass of Jews in east-central Europe were sunk in dire poverty—and sinking further into total immiseration. A nation of shopkeepers, the Jews found themselves superfluous men, both in a Soviet Union that had abolished the marketplace and in militantly nationalistic states that complained of Jewish dominance of it. The USSR at least allowed the Jew to change from *homo economicus* to the new Stalinist model worker; Germany, Poland, and Romania regarded the Jews as unregenerate and demanded that they leave.

A large part of the explanation was anti-Semitism. The roots of the antipathy toward Jews have been endlessly explored. No discussion of the Jews in this period is feasible without reference to this antagonism, deeply entrenched in the consciousness of European civilization. But that is not the primary focus of this book, which is squarely on the Jews themselves, not their persecutors.

Nor is anti-Semitism by itself a satisfactory explanation of the Jews' predicament. In large measure the Jews were victims of their own success. Whether in the USSR, Poland, Germany, or France, Jews sincerely protested their loyalty to states of which they were citizens. Yet the more they took advantage of their newfound legal equality and embraced the national life of their countries of residence, the more they evoked a jealous, exclusionist hostility. Many responded by trying even harder to throw off their distinctive traits, hoping to blend in so as to be unnoticed. Confronted by violent enmity, they embarked on a road toward collective oblivion that appeared to be the price of individual survival.

As a result, Jewish culture was in retreat. Religious practice was decreasing and the orthodox, in particular, felt embattled and threatened. Secular alternatives that sought to replace religion as the core of Jewish identity found themselves increasingly overwhelmed by apparently invincible forces of acculturation to the non-Jewish world. The cultural glue that had long bound Jews together was losing its cohesive power. A telling index of this process was the fading away of Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Judeo-Espagnol, the tongues, respectively, of the Jews of northeastern and southeastern Europe.

Yet in a continent that in the 1930s was overwhelmed by economic depression and racist resentment, the Jews found that

assimilation and acculturation, rather than easing their path to acceptance, aroused still more hatred against them. This book therefore examines the position of a people confronted with an impossible dilemma.

Who was the European Jew in the 1930s? Or rather, since the notion of a single national, ethnic, or religious type, so commonly held in that period, is now indefensible, who were the European Jews, in the plural? Were they atomized individuals or did they, or some among them, share ideals, outlooks, assumptions, memories, expectations, fears—in short, can we identify collective Jewish mentalities? What values did they hold in common? Was theirs a distinctive culture or set of subcultures? Can we locate Jewish milieux, whether as geographical sites, as social clusters, or as dwelling places of the imagination? What meaning should we attach to such terms as Jewish literature, music, or art? How cohesive were Jewish communities? How effective were Jews in building social capital—the networks of connectedness in the form of institutions (political parties, representative organizations, charitable bodies, hospitals, schools, newspapers, and so on) that might shape their lives? Was the Jew merely a passive object, acted upon by a hostile, circumambient society, or could the individual, whether alone or in concert with others, try to attain at least some degree of control over the threatening vagaries of fate?

My answer to the last question, at least, may be stated at the outset in the affirmative, even if the results were often tragically out of proportion to the efforts invested. The European Jews in the 1930s were actors in their own history, though they have too often been depicted otherwise. They struggled by every available means to confront what was already perceptible to many as a challenge to their very survival.

They faced a common threat but they were far from a unified monolith. Economically they ranged from a tiny elite of gilded plutocrats to a horde of impoverished pedlars, hawkers, and beggars. A large minority, mainly in east-central Europe, remained strictly orthodox; others, particularly in western Europe and the Soviet Union, were thoroughly secularized; a broad, middling majority of the semi-traditional were comfortably selective in their degree of

religious practice. Politically the Jews were deeply divided but none of the ideologies in which they reposed confidence, whether liberalism, socialism, or Zionism, offered any immediate solution to their predicament. As for utopian schemes for settlement in exotic locations around the world, these too failed to alleviate their deepening plight.

By 1939 more and more Jews in Europe were being reduced to wandering refugees. They were being ground down into a camp people, without the right to a home anywhere and consequently with rights almost nowhere. Growing numbers were confined in concentration or internment camps—not just in Germany but all over the continent, even in democracies such as France and the Netherlands. Indeed, in the summer of 1939, more Jews were being held in camps outside the Third Reich than within it.

From there to mass murder was not an inevitable step. I have tried, as far as possible or reasonable, to avoid the wisdom of hindsight and to bear in mind that the nature and scale of the impending genocide was unforeseeable to those I am writing about—though, as we shall see, there were surprisingly frequent and anguished intimations of doom.

While the word *Europe* appears in the title and although the book is in some ways a forerunner to my history of postwar European Jewry, *Vanishing Diaspora* (1996), the spotlight here is on those parts of the continent that were occupied by the Nazis or their allies between 1939 and 1945. Countries such as Britain and Turkey consequently lie outside my purview.

As in *Vanishing Diaspora*, the Jew is defined inclusively as that person who considered him- or herself or was considered by others as a Jew. In this period, when racial, religious, and secular conceptions of Jewishness battled in the ideological arena and within the souls of individuals, such a broad framework of consideration is essential for understanding what was known at the time, by Jews and non-Jews alike, as the “Jewish question.” Indeed, it is precisely in the frontier area of the “non-Jewish Jew” that we may glean valuable insights into the aspirations, the achievements, and the agony of the European Jews.

My account ends with the outbreak of the Second World War

in Europe in September 1939. But the reader will very likely have a natural human desire to know what later became of many of the individuals who appear here. The epilogue therefore gives brief details, so far as these have been possible to establish, of their subsequent destinies.

There exists a huge literature on the genocide of the Jews under Nazi rule. We know in precise detail almost every stage of the process by which the Nazis annihilated the Jews in every country of occupied Europe. By contrast, much less attention has been paid to the worlds that were destroyed: the private worlds of individuals and families and the public ones of communities and institutions. What has been written about all this has too often been distorted by special pleading or sentimentality.

This book, therefore, seeks to capture the realities of life in Europe in the years leading up to 1939, when the Jews stood, as we now know, at the edge of an abyss. It discusses their hopes and beliefs, anxieties and ambitions, family ties, internal and external relations, their cultural creativity, amusements, songs, fads and fancies, dress, diet, and, insofar as they can be grasped, the things that made existence meaningful and bearable for them. The fundamental objective has been to try to restore forgotten men, women, and children to the historical record, to breathe renewed life momentarily into those who were soon to be dry bones.

THE MELTING GLACIER

Four Zones

Ten million Jews lived in Europe in the late 1930s. They were distributed among four zones, each with a different history, divergent conditions of life, and, on the face of things, varying prospects for the future. In the democracies of western Europe, Jews had been emancipated for several generations and enjoyed a civic equality that, in spite of the rising tide of anti-Semitism, protected them, for the time being, against any threat to their security. By contrast, in Germany and those parts of central Europe that had already been absorbed into the Third Reich, Jews were in the process of being stripped of citizenship, subjected to discriminatory laws, driven out of the professions, and deprived of the bulk of their possessions, and were under intense pressure to emigrate. In a third zone, comprising all the states of east-central Europe, anti-Semitism, often drawing on deep popular roots, formed a significant element in political discourse and in most countries had been integrated into public policy in the shape of explicitly or implicitly anti-Jewish laws. Finally, in the Soviet Union, where the Jews had been emancipated in 1917, later than anywhere else in Europe (save only Romania), they enjoyed dramatic upward social mobility in the interwar period. But collective Jewish life, whether religious, political, or cultural, was, like other aspects of existence under Stalin, subject to severe restrictions.

In German, the word *Judentum* means simultaneously “Judaism” and “Jewry.” But in the heart of the European Jew since the Enlightenment a schism had arisen between the conceptions of

Judaism as a religion and as a *Volksgemeinde*, a community based on common ethnicity. In France, since their emancipation during the revolution, many Jews had come to regard it as a cardinal principle that Jewishness was a purely religious category and that in every respect they were as French as other Frenchmen. In Germany, where emancipation had come later and where social relations between Jews and gentiles, even in the liberal Weimar period between 1918 and 1933, were more fragile, matters were slightly different. There, writes George Mosse, a scion of the German-Jewish elite, “there was no either/or—either German or Jew. . . . Jewishness was not merely a religion but was primarily linked to pride of family, from which it could not be divorced.”¹ In eastern Europe, where boundaries of state and nation rarely ran together, and where most Jews still spoke Yiddish, lived in dense concentrations, and held more closely to their own cultural patterns, Jewishness tended to be seen by Jews themselves as well as by their neighbors as primarily an ethnic category. This was true also in the USSR, where “Jewish” was a legally recognized national distinction.

Like God in France

The democratic zone of interwar Europe was the most comfortable for Jews. But it held the smallest share of the continent’s Jewish population, under a million, or less than 10 percent of the total.

In western Europe, however, the security that Jews enjoyed was no longer quite so automatic or unquestioned as in the past. True, a Jew had been elected prime minister of France in 1936. But the socialist Léon Blum’s victory as head of the left-wing Popular Front was regarded as a mixed blessing by many French Jews. The government’s enemies on the right focused on Blum’s Jewishness and used it, to some effect, as a propaganda bludgeon against the left. Even in the Netherlands, with its long history of Christian-Jewish amity, stretching back to the friendly reception of “New Christians” (Marranos) from the Iberian peninsula in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a certain unease entered into the relationship in the 1930s following the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Nazi Germany.

The phrase *heureux comme un juif en France* (“happy like a Jew in France”) had come to have the proverbial meaning of *very* happy. But over the previous generation it had often been tinged with irony. At the turn of the century, the Dreyfus Affair had suggested that there were limits to the recognition of Jews as French. Since 1919, with the return by Germany of Alsace and Lorraine to France, French Jews, a majority of whom traced their origins to the two regained provinces, might again feel content to be fully part of the national patrimony. But their enemies now turned the phrase against them, suggesting that the Jews were *too* happy in France, in other words that they were doing too well, at the expense of others.

Mendelssohn's Heirs

In its origin, the phrase was a play on the German/Yiddish *leben wie Gott in Frankreich*, which meant to live *very* well. Under the Weimar Republic in Germany, Jews looked forward to the consolidation of more than a century of progress toward legal equality and social acceptance in a country and culture in which they felt no less at home than French Jews did in France.

That sense of ease was manifested all over Germany in September 1929, when Jews and Christians alike celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Moses Mendelssohn, father of the Jewish enlightenment and progenitor of a dynasty of bankers, musicians, and scholars who remained a significant force in the culture, economy, and politics of the country. The minister of the interior, Carl Severing, and the leading Liberal rabbi in Berlin, Leo Baeck, were among those who delivered encomia to mark the occasion. At a Sunday matinée concert in Mendelssohn's birthplace, Dessau, works by Bach and Beethoven were performed in his honor. A representative of the city of Berlin laid a wreath at the philosopher's grave in memory of a “great fellow-citizen.” His descendants, all now Christians, reserved an entire luxury hotel for three days for a gathering of the clan. The series of events was a symbolic high point of the modern German-Jewish symbiosis.²

One month later, the Wall Street crash marked the start of the

world's descent into depression and war—and the toppling of German Jewry from its pedestal as the most proud, wealthy, creative, and forward-looking Jewish community in Europe.

Immediately upon attaining power in January 1933, the Nazis launched a campaign of terror and violence against Jews and leftists. Synagogue and shop windows were smashed. Jews were killed or beaten up in random street attacks. A nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, met with mixed success. It was followed, however, by the dismissal of almost all Jewish civil servants, including teachers and university professors. Jewish doctors and lawyers were restricted in their professions. State welfare support for Jews was limited. Quotas were introduced for Jewish university students. Such early anti-Jewish measures resulted in at least three hundred suicides.

As early as April 1933, just three months after Hitler's capture of power, Baeck, who emerged as German Jewry's leader and spokesman in its final decade, declared, "The thousand-year history of German Jewry has come to an end."³ Of the half million "Jews by religion" in Germany, about forty thousand fled the country within a year.

The Reichsvertretung der Deutschen Juden (Reich Representation of German Jews), with Baeck at its head, secured de facto recognition from the Nazi regime in September 1933 as the representative body of German Jews. For the next six years the Reichsvertretung formed a kind of internal self-government of German Jewry. On the one hand, Baeck and his colleagues sought to shield German Jews from the savage onslaught to which they were subjected. On the other, they found themselves compelled to act in compliance with Nazi orders and to facilitate the orderly execution of Nazi policies. These were, of course, ultimately incompatible functions; but for a time the Reichsvertretung succeeded to some extent in harmonizing them, through its efforts to organize social welfare, education, and cultural activities. While seeking to preserve desperately needed working relationships with the authorities, the Reichsvertretung did not, in the early years, shrink from remonstrance: in May 1934, for example, in response to scurrilous anti-Semitic statements, it dispatched a telegram to Hitler: "Before God and men, we raise our voices in protest against this unparalleled calumny against our faith."⁴

Jewish society. In the sphere of population, indeed, the Jews were much less assimilators to existing social patterns than pioneers of the demographic transition that, over the next two generations, was to transform European society as a whole.

High Life Expectancy

As a collectivity, then, European Jews might appear to have been heading toward extinction. Yet individually they could expect to live longer than ever before and longer than their neighbors. Their high life expectancy arose from their relatively favorable levels of health. Alcoholism, a major contributor to early death in many countries, was almost unknown among Jews: in 1925 the number of arrests for drunkenness in Warsaw, where Jews were one-third of the population, was 87 for Jews and 11,994 for non-Jews.²⁶ Deaths from cirrhosis of the liver, reflecting alcoholism, were less common among Jews than in the general population. The incidence of syphilis and other venereal diseases was lower among Jews. They also exhibited greater resistance than others to contagious diseases such as tuberculosis (even when comparing Jews and non-Jews of the same social class).²⁷

In the 1930s, however, a change of direction in relative Jewish health was detected. Overall, the general Jewish medical condition in eastern Europe, though still more robust than that of the general population, was reported by knowledgeable observers to be deteriorating. Jews were particularly susceptible to digestive and vascular troubles. They died disproportionately from diabetes, heart disease, and, in the slums of Warsaw, respiratory illnesses.²⁸ Moreover, certain less serious ailments were endemic among poor Jews in eastern Europe, notably scabies. In the wretched Jewish working-class areas of Łódź the prevalence of typhoid fever was above average and an investigator in 1930 reported that “the sick-rate curve for Jews has grown in recent years, while that for Christians has kept on falling.”²⁹

A doctor in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, in 1937 lamented the squalor in which the greater part of the Jewish working class of the city lived:

Ritual requirements notwithstanding, people don't wash much. Hands are dirty, nails are black, people are afraid of soap, don't change underwear often enough, and as for toothbrushing, that's already a sign of a bourgeois situation. Parasites still play a considerable part in Jewish life. . . . Lice, fleas, and bugs are, in effect, family members in far too many Jewish households. Worms are constant companions among children and very widespread among adults.³⁰

Venereal diseases, including syphilis, were said to be spreading among Jews, although they were still far less prevalent among Jews than non-Jews.

The Jewish diet, according to the Kovno report, was unhealthy: unvaried, poor in vitamins, too fatty and spicy. The very poorest would subsist on little more than black bread, potatoes, cabbage, borscht, and tea. Challah (braided white bread) would be eaten only on the Sabbath. Cheaply available herring was consumed a great deal. But "the Jew exhibits an aversion to all green vegetables."³¹ Moreover, complained the same doctor in Kovno, food was gobbled down rather than chewed.

Marrying Out

Most European Jews in the nineteenth century married other Jews. By the early twentieth century, however, a significant growth in exogamy was registered across the continent. At first the trend was strongest in western and central Europe, but by the 1930s it was noticeable elsewhere, particularly in the Soviet Union.

In Denmark and Italy, where relations between the small Jewish communities and general society were generally harmonious, more than half of all marriages by Jews in the mid-1930s were with non-Jews. In Bohemia and Moravia, where the intermarriage rate before the First World War had been under 5 percent, it reached 30 percent by the 1930s.

In Hungary and Germany, the graph of Jewish intermarriage showed an inverted V. In Hungary the rate was 25 percent in the early and mid-1930s. Thereafter it declined as anti-Semitism

poisoned the social atmosphere and Jewish partners became less attractive marital propositions.³² In Germany the change was drastic. In the early 1930s a majority of German-Jewish marriages were with non-Jews. After the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, however, the rate plummeted to zero, as marriages of Jews with "Aryans" became illegal, though existing mixed marriages generally remained intact.

More men married outside the faith than women: in central Europe in 1929 about three men did so for every two women. As a result, the children of mixed marriages were, in their great majority, not regarded as Jewish according to religious law (which recognized only the child of a Jewish mother as Jewish). Mixed marriages tended to produce even fewer children, on average, than all-Jewish marriages: in Germany the average was just 0.5 per couple. The reasons, in the sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1930s, were not far to seek. One demographic expert suggested: "Birth control is even more intensive in mixed marriages, because the sore points are more numerous and the desire is dominant to avoid the possibilities of conflict, which may arise because of the children."³³ Moreover, the children of mixed marriages in Germany and Hungary were much more likely to be brought up in the Christian (or in no) faith than as Jews. According to an estimate in Germany in 1928–29, a mere 2 percent of children of such unions were raised in the Jewish faith.³⁴ Intermarriage, on the scale and in the form that it took in central Europe in the interwar period, thus portended the rapid disappearance of the Jewish community.

In the Russian Empire mixed marriages were not permitted before 1917 (the legal ban remained in force in the former Russian provinces of Poland in the interwar period). After the revolution, however, marriage between Jews and non-Jews in the USSR increased rapidly. By 1939 out of every thousand marriages in which one partner was a Jew, 368 were mixed marriages. In Moscow and Leningrad around half of all Jewish marriages were mixed. In the Soviet Union too, far more men than women married non-Jews, with the result that, by 1939, there were much larger numbers of unmarried Jewish women than men in the USSR, with a consequent further negative effect on the Jewish birthrate.