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# Jewish Emancipation to 1919

The historian Jakob Katz described Jewish emancipation as the event that brought western and central European Jews "out of the ghetto" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[1] Though more a "tortuous path" than a single occurrence, emancipation nevertheless ushered in a process of Jewish integration into Gentile society by granting Jews civil rights and political privileges such as citizenship, suffrage, and eligibility for public office.[2] In return for the acquisition of rights, Jews were obliged to abandon their separate communal status and become "useful" citizens. Most Jews welcomed the chance both to play a role in a larger polity and to find new ways of sustaining aspects of their singularity. Sadly, the reality of life after emancipation was not nearly as bright as the future its supporters had envisioned because many Christians remained intolerant of Jews for traditional religious and economic reasons, and some invented more vicious charges against them. This chapter sets the scene for my analysis of Gentile-Jewish relations in Frankfurt am Main, Giessen, and Geisenheim during the Weimar era by focusing on the consequences of Jewish emancipation in those towns before 1919.

Before emancipation, the Jews of western and central Europe lived in communities that were segregated from Gentile society. In the German states, the Jewish community (*Gemeinde*) was a legal entity, a "corporation" that exercised certain decentralized functions of self-government within its precincts and acted as the official representative of Jews to the Gentile world.[3] The community paid taxes to non-Jewish authorities and administered synagogues, cemeteries, schools, and various cultural institutions. After emancipation, the Jewish community did much the same, although it was no longer a corporation representing segregated Jews but a religious congregation made up of Jewish citizens. Despite the lack of a centralized organization such as existed in England and France and the eventual appearance of diverse forms of religious beliefs within their midst, Germany's Jewish communities assumed a measure of unity by referring to themselves as Israelitische

Gemeinden (IG).[4] By 1933, there were 1,611 Jewish communities in Germany, and most of them were rural.[5]

Jewish communities had existed in Frankfurt since 1150, in Giessen since the mid-fourteenth century, and in Geisenheim since at least 1300.[6] According to Ulrich Friedrich Kopp, an eighteenth-century lawyer who addressed the "Jewish Question" in Hessen, "The history of Hessen's Jews was no different than Germany overall; Jews were also persecuted here."[7] As elsewhere in continental Europe, Jews in Hessen were ghettoized, forbidden to own land, denied guild membership, taxed heavily (for instance, through the *Leibzoll*, a duty imposed on traveling Jews that taxed them literally as cattle), and frequently harassed by antisemites. The only occupations open to them were certain forms of commerce, namely, cattle trading, peddling, hawking, and moneylending. Before Jews could engage in any of these vocations, they needed special, aristocratic dispensations of protection that were sold arbitrarily and limited in number. In this restrictive environment, only a few Jews succeeded in becoming well-to-do by the end of the eighteenth century. The vast majority of Jews in Hessen (and in Europe) remained mired in poverty.[7]

The situation changed with the advent of rationalism and the development of European nation-states in the 1700s. Intellectuals and political leaders began to support the removal of economic and political restrictions on Jews. Eagerly seeking to free up Jewish capital for national purposes, kings and nobles in central Europe curried favor from wealthy Jewish merchants, appointing some to court positions (*Hofjuden*). At the same time, rationalist philosophers wanted to emancipate Jews both out of a commitment to individual freedom and a desire to transform them into educated, productive members of European society as adherents of the Jewish or "Mosaic" faith. Ultimately, Jews were to be granted civil and political rights in return for their loyalty to the surrounding nation and their "moral and civic betterment" (*sittliche und bürgerliche Verbesserung*). France emancipated its Jews in the 1790s, and Bonaparte's armies brought an end to ghettoization in central Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

After Napoleon's defeat, restrictions on Jews resurfaced in many German cities and states. In the 1820s, officials denied marriage licenses and residence permits to Jews in Geisenheim.[8] An 1833 law from Hessen-Kassel excluded poorer Jews in its bestowal of legal equality.[9] In the county of Giessen, an 1844 ordinance decreed that Jewish ritual baths were to be filled with dirt.[10] Following the revolutions of 1848, in which liberals briefly held power in central Europe, Jews regained and then quickly lost various freedoms. After 1848 in the duchy of Nassau, only Jews possessing letters of protection could become citizens and obtain voting privileges. On 27 September 1851, Duke Adolf rescinded those rights. In Frankfurt, the city senate voted on 5 October 1852 to extend Jews neither active nor passive suffrage. Yet nine years later, Adolf voided a law that preserved the second-class status of Jews, and in 1864, the Frankfurt Assembly agreed to end restrictions against "citizens of the Mosaic faith." Meanwhile, an 1848 edict from the elector of Hessen-Kassel, which had emancipated the Jews of Kurhessen, was nullified in 1852. The electorate's Jews received lasting civil and political rights after Prussia's annexation of Hessen-Kassel in the late 1860s.[11] These rights were extended to all Jews following the unification of Germany under Prussian auspices in 1871.



The fleeting nature of emancipatory laws in nineteenth-century central Europe fostered Jewish emigration but also an intensified effort among Jews to blend into Gentile society within a framework that safeguarded Jewish identity.[12] Jews adopted German as their mother tongue, took German names,[13] conformed to German fashion trends, attended German schools, moved to cities, voted for Germans who supported their emancipation (mainly liberals), and engaged in economic pursuits such as retail trade that were "respectable," although still highly problematic. The economic transformation of the Jews was particularly striking. By 1870, nearly 80 percent of all Jews belonged to the middle class, and nearly 60 percent were in upper-income brackets. No longer at the extremes of the economic scale, as they had been a century before, Jews were firmly bourgeois by 1900.[14]

Accompanying this socioeconomic change over the course of the nineteenth century was the emergence of a Jewish subculture that fused Enlightenment philosophy, cosmopolitanism, and cultivation (*Bildung*) with secular appreciations of Jewish history and new approaches to Jewish theology, two elements that often competed for the soul of the modern Jew.[15] In the late 1700s, Jewish intellectuals led a movement that proposed the incorporation of *Aufklärung* philosophies into Judaism. The Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* desired the reconstruction of community based on the principles of ethical rationalism and humanitarianism. The *Haskalah*'s espousal of integration and use of Enlightenment discourse, along with the continued presence of Jew-hatred, however, produced an upswing in Jewish conversions to Christianity.[16] In subsequent generations, intellectuals like David

Frankel and Leopold Zunz and religious movements such as Reform, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Conservatism sought different ways out of this dead end.

Proponents of Reform saw Judaism as an evolving religion that needed to be updated so as to convey effectively its message of ethical monotheism. Reformers therefore jettisoned aspects of the religion deemed vestigial, the observance of dietary laws for one, and emulated many aspects of Christian worship through the introduction of decorum and sermons. Frankfurt am Main proved to be a focal point of Reform.[17] It hosted the second synod of Reform rabbis in 1845 and was home to two of the most important figures in the Reform movement, Isaac Marcus Jost and Abraham Geiger. Progressive Rabbinism, a moderate branch of Reform led by Leopold Stein, found a home in Frankfurt as well. The main synagogue in Frankfurt's Jewish quarter on Bornestrasse, in the Judengasse, embraced Reform ritual, and so did the main synagogue in Giessen on the Sudanlage.[18]

Frankfurt and Giessen also had a number of Jewish followers of Neo-Orthodoxy, a mid-nineteenth-century phenomenon which began in the Main metropolis and spread throughout Germany as a reaction to Reform. Led by Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Neo-Orthodox opposed Reform religious doctrine and held to strict observance of Jewish law without rejecting German citizenship. In 1850, an Orthodox conference in Frankfurt dubbed its movement the Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft (IRG—Jewish Religious Society), and four years later, the IRG opened a synagogue on Schutzenstrasse. The IRG officially parted from the Frankfurt Gemeinde in 1876.[19] The Neo-Orthodox went so far as to declare themselves members of a religion apart from Reform; hence they became known as secessionist Orthodox or *Austrittsorthodoxen*.[20] In Giessen, the Neo-Orthodox established a synagogue of their own on Steinstrasse in 1900.[21] According to Gershom Scholem, the proportion of Orthodox Jews in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century hovered around 20 percent.[22]

While Germany's large urban areas proved fertile ground for Reform Judaism, its presence in Hessen's smaller villages during the nineteenth century was limited.[23] By the same token, not all traditional, rural Jews supported Hirsch's separatists. Some became advocates of Positive-historical or Conservative Judaism, a compromise between Reform and Orthodox, some chose to stay within the general Jewish community as adherents to Orthodoxy, the so-called *Gemeindeorthodox*, and others adopted an amorphous mixture of the two.[24] The Jews of Rüdesheim,



Geisenheim, and Winkel attended Gemeinde services in Rudesheim that were relatively traditional, and Geisenheim's Jewish community also maintained a small Orthodox chapel.[25] Further affecting the German Jewish religious landscape was the urban influx of eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*) fleeing persecution in the late 1800s. Both Frankfurt and Giessen had sizable foreign Jewish contingents: by 1910, 3,541 out of 26,228 Jews in Frankfurt were foreign-born, in Giessen, 57 out of 913.[26]

One of the major dilemmas facing Germany's "citizens of the Mosaic faith" was a decline in religious observance over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was mitigated slightly by the infusion of *Ostjuden* and a religious revival sparked by rising antisemitism after World War I. Leo Baeck, Berlin's Reform rabbi during the Weimar period, feared that Jews would allow themselves to be seduced by the unrestrained individualism of modern culture. Only the Jewish religion, he argued, could save them from "anarchism of the soul."[27] The shift away from religion notwithstanding, most German Jews in the postemancipation era continued to identify themselves as Jews at some level while remaining loyal to *Deutschtum* as an overarching national and cultural identity.[28]

What endangered this tentative symbiosis far more than secularization, nonreligious approaches to Jewish identity, or the seductive lure of assimilation was the endurance of well-rooted religious animosities toward Jews and the growth of new manifestations of antisemitism, some actually spawned by failed expectations of Jewish conversion to Christianity following emancipation.[29] In the ongoing debate over German identity, itself fueled by the unsettling results of unification by Prussia in 1871, some believed that Germany was a Christian state and that to become a German, one had first to become a Christian.[30] Tensions within the very premise of Jewish emancipation as well as resentment against the acquisition of civil and political rights on the part of Jews sparked a host of new accusations that, for the first time, constituted fodder for party politics and mass politicization.

From a religious standpoint, Jews were still targets for their rejection of Jesus and for the crime of deicide. But Jews became linked to modernity, and specifically to liberalism, the ideology of their liberation which had championed parliamentarianism, capitalism, and industrialization. Jewish financiers were blamed for the banking crashes of 1873 in Vienna and Berlin which ushered in a depression and a period of liberal retreat. Peasants, moreover, protested Jewish cattle trading and moneylending practices, and artisans complained about Jewish retail

salesmen, both groups ignoring the vast Gentile presence in commerce. Eleanore Sterling has postulated the essential continuity of medieval and modern antisemitism by finding in the latter a secularized variation of the former. The Jews remained devils to powerless and exploited people of unsophisticated social and political awareness.[31]

Political antisemitism found spokesmen in individuals like Wilhelm Marr, who coined the term "antisemitism," Adolf Stöcker, who founded one of the first antisemitic parties in Germany in the Christian Social Workers' Party, Georg von Schönerer, a pan-German nationalist, Heinrich von Treitschke, an antisemitic Prussian historian whose dictum "the Jews are our misfortune" later became a Nazi rallying cry, and Karl Lueger, Vienna's mayor in the fin de siècle who ran on an antisemitic platform.[32]

Accompanying the rise of political and economic antisemitism was the far more radical emergence of racial antisemitism. Whereas traditional and political antisemites viewed conversion to Christianity as the ticket to societal acceptance, racial antisemites like Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Theodor Fritsch argued that Jewish integration was not only undesirable but biologically impossible.[33] As polar opposites on the race spectrum, "Semites" and "Aryans" could never mix.[34] A direct result of the rise of *völkisch* ideologies, Social Darwinism, and eugenic science, racial antisemitism found a vulgar spokesman in Adolf Hitler.[35]

Hessen was a particulary notorious hotbed of Jew-hatred in the late nineteenth century. In 1887, Otto Böckel, a former Marburg university student and librarian, led an antisemitic peasant movement in rural Hessen to become the first political antisemite ever to hold a seat in the lower house of the German parliament.[36] In Marburg and Giessen, Gentile students eased insecurities over their own futures by bemoaning the rise in university attendance among Jews, while many farmers out in the countryside resented Jewish cattle traders who sold on credit. In Frankfurt, antisemitism was largely the preserve of student groups, academic organizations (the Verein akademisch gebildeter Lehrer), marginal nationalist associations (the Deutscher Verein), writers (Johann Baptist von Schweitzer), and political cartoonists (notably those from the *Frankfurter Latern*).[37] Jew-hatred in Geisenheim, by contrast, was less pronounced. Catholics constituted a majority there and in the Rheingau, while they were a minority throughout Hessen as a whole. It is most likely that their existence as a once persecuted minority as well as their close association with political parties that opposed the radical right made Catholics more critical of antisemitism.[38]



But Gentile resentment against Jews as merchants or cattle traders was also absent from daily life in Geisenheim. The antisemitic political parties of the late imperial period in Germany suffered major defeats in the 1912 national elections when an economic recovery and voter dissatisfaction with their single-issue nature set in. In hindsight, the demise of political antisemitism proved ephemeral.[39]

German Jews responded to the rise of new forms of prejudice in a variety of ways.[40] Some chose to increase the pace of their integration by converting to Christianity or by simply affirming their German identity. Others came to the defense of their Jewishness and continued to hope for the realization of *Aufklärung* ideals. In 1893, the Berlin Jewish community established the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith (the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens or CV), which not only engaged in a defensive campaign against antisemitism but also reasserted Jewish loyalty to Germany and liberalism. A federation of student fraternities, called the Convention of Fraternities of German Students of the Jewish Faith (Kartell-Convent), emerged in 1896 with a similar approach. In 1891, before the founding of either organization, Jews and Gentiles had established the Association to Resist Antisemitism (Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus), a small but active organization that carried its uphill battle against Jew-hatred into the Weimar years.

By the 1920s, membership in the CV numbered more than sixty thousand. Following the reorganization of the CV into regional groups (*Ortsgruppe*), Jewish leaders in Frankfurt set up their own chapter of the CV in 1907. Leaders in Frankfurt's Reform community, including Ernst Auerbach, Hugo Apolant, Rudolf Geiger, and Salo Adler, joined with Neo-Orthodox separatists such as Elias Fink to combat Jew-hatred through antidefamation and the cultivation of Jewish self-esteem. The CV embarked on a vigorous campaign of enlightenment by publishing books, newspapers, and brochures, the most significant of which was its "Anti-Anti" handbook on the myths of antisemitism. Despite selling over thirty thousand copies of the pamphlet in Germany by 1932, the CV was ultimately unsuccessful in its efforts. The Frankfurter *Ortsgruppe* even encountered difficulties trying to convince Jews in the city not to subscribe to the antisemitic *Frankfurter Beobachter.*[41]

Many Jews saw the recrudescence of antisemitism as a sign that emancipation had failed, and they turned to Jewish nationalism.[42] In 1897, ten years before the establishment of the Frankfurt CV, a group of Zionists formed the Zionist Association of Germany (Zionistische

Vereinigung für Deutschland, ZVfD). Unlike their eastern European counterparts, German Zionists were a small group before 1918, numbering 8,964 at most.[43] Although they too promoted the idea that Jews constituted a "nation" that needed a homeland to defend against antisemitism, German Zionists initially focused more on bettering the lives of *Ostjuden* than on settlement in Palestine.

Support for the Zionist movement in Frankfurt early on came from poverty-stricken "eastern Jews" who bore the brunt of fin-de-siecle German antisemitism. However, the leaders of the Frankfurt Zionist *Ortsgruppe*, which had a total membership of 153 in 1905, were *Gemeindeorthodox* and included Fritz Sondheimer, Jakob Goitein, Sali Geis, and Salomon Hirsch Goldmann—the father of the future president of the German Zionist movement, Nahum Goldmann. Many Orthodox Jews heeded the Zionist call out of a desire both to help their eastern European counterparts and to curb waning interest in the religious aspects of Judaism by focusing on Jewish communal pride. But most, like Markus Horovitz, head of the IG's Orthodox faction in the late nineteenth century, opposed Zionism because of its secular, nationalist orientation.[44] In the Hessian countryside, in Giessen and in Geisenheim, the Zionist presence was even weaker, if not nonexistent.

At no time were Jews better able to prove their commitment to the Fatherland than during World War I. On 1 August 1914, the CV lent its support to the German cause and called on all Jews to do the same. Frankfurt, Giessen, and the Rheingau all supplied Jewish foot soldiers for the war effort. A Jewish soldier from Frankfurt remembered that a rabbi beseeched God for a German victory during services held behind the front lines.[45] Yet as prospects for success in the war eroded, German Jewish loyalty to the kaiser was called into question. Although they refrained from siding with the Allied powers (Great Britain, France, the United States, and Russia), Zionists became targets of antisemitic invective after England issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which championed a Jewish homeland in Palestine.[46] A year earlier, the German government had conducted a *Judenzählung* or "Jew census" of Jewish soldiers in response to charges that German Jewry was shirking its patriotic duty.[47] Later studies by Franz Oppenheimer and Jakob Segall actually revealed that the Jewish contribution to the war effort, in the number of Jews killed or wounded, was disproportionately high.[48] Although its findings were never published, the Jew census constituted the most spectacular symptom of the increase in antisemitism during the last years of the war.[49]



The experience of German Jews in World War I demonstrated how Jewish perceptions of their integration were at odds with reality; 12,000 Jews, including 467 from Frankfurt, 18 from Giessen, and 3 from the Rheingau, had died for their country.[50] Jewish veterans even formed the Imperial Union of Jewish Front Soldiers (Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten), which emphasized Jewish wartime patriotism. For all of their flag-waving, Jews still met widespread antipathy and disregard from Gentiles.

With Germany's defeat in the war and the subsequent establishment of the Weimar Republic in 1919, the future of Jewish integration into German society appeared brighter. The imperial political system, dominated largely by Prussia's conservative landowning class, the Junkers, gave way to a democratic constitution. Germany's Jewish communities were accorded legal and fiscal equality with the established Christian churches. Berlin became an unparalleled center for Jewish culture in Europe, intermarriage rates rose, and more Jews held public office than ever before.[51] Five of the nine Nobel prizes won by German citizens during the Weimar years went to Jewish scientists, two for medicine and three for physics, including one to Albert Einstein. Weimar's literary world was also replete with Jewish names. Books by Jakob Wassermann, Stefan Zweig, and Lion Feuchtwanger made best-seller lists, and a 1926 poll of the readers of the prestigious magazine *Literarische Welt* revealed that Franz Werfel stood second only to Thomas Mann in their affections.[52]

These contributions, however, only served to link Jews with a democratic order that fell into disfavor because of its association with the unpopular Treaty of Versailles, political instability, cultural modernity, and economic chaos (hyperinflation, harsh stabilization, and then depression).[53] At the heart of the critique of the radical right, in particular, stood "the Jew," the embodiment of all the forces allegedly "stabbing Germany in the back" and undermining German economics, politics, and culture. Justified or not, most German Jews clung to liberalism and *Aufklärung* as the bases for German Jewish identity during the Weimar period, hoping that through education and antidefamation they could transform German society into the amicable home envisioned by their emancipators. Only in hindsight did this optimism seem misplaced.