

Introduction

Historical writing about Jews unfortunately focuses too much on great events and persecutions. The undermining impact of assimilation, more important but more difficult to capture, still awaits its historians.

—Arthur Ruppin¹

Jewish history is not only the history of men and women who saw themselves as representatives of the Jewish collective and who sought to promote national or religious Jewish interests. It must also deal with those who hoped for the disappearance of the Jews, as well as the successes and failures of these assimilationists in their efforts to disappear forever into Gentile society.

—Ezra Mendelsohn²

AT THE HEART OF THE CURRENT DEBATE about multiculturalism are questions about the terms on which racial and ethnic minorities are to be integrated into the American mainstream. Diehard segregationists aside, the parties to the debate agree that there should be room at the American table for persons of diverse backgrounds. They also agree that those who wish to be included must embrace some of the behavioral and attitudinal norms of the dominant group. What divides them are questions about the extent to which they must do so, the distance they must travel in effacing their distinctiveness in order to gain access to centers of social, economic, and political life. They do not agree about the extent and the character of their transformation. So they ask how they are to reshape their tastes and beliefs, as well as their dress, speech, and deportment, querying which inherited customs and outlooks are out of step with conventional thinking and behavior and thus obstacles to social and material success. What is at

stake in the multiculturalism debate, then, is the price to be paid for inclusion rather than the right to be included.

This problem is neither novel in the history of the West nor peculiar to the United States and its unusually heterogeneous population. It first arose in acute form in regard to the Jews of Western and Central Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the process of Jewish political emancipation it inaugurated. Before the era of liberal revolutions, Jews constituted a semiautonomous corporation wherever they lived, a well-defined social and political unit, marked off from their neighbors by virtue of their religion, national background, legal and fiscal status, and, in most cases, their social habits, occupational profile, language, and costume as well. When economic and political upheaval weakened or even dissolved the corporate structure of European states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jews became citizens and were incorporated as individuals. Both Jews who welcomed emancipation and the demise of the traditional Jewish community and their Christian supporters assumed that with the disappearance of old-regime disabilities Jews would lose their distinctive social and cultural characteristics and become indistinguishable, more or less, from their fellow citizens, except in regard to their religion. Their shared hope was that Jews would become Frenchmen or Germans or Hungarians of the Jewish faith, their “Jewishness” restricted to the private sphere of worship, ritual, and doctrine. They envisioned the abandonment of Jewish peoplehood and the softening of Jewish particularism. For both, the emancipation of the Jews and their social, cultural, and economic transformation went hand in hand. Among Christians, however, there was a split between conservatives and liberals about which should come first—emancipation or acculturation. The former insisted that emancipation was a reward, a favor to be bestowed on the Jews only after they had proved themselves worthy of incorporation into the nation-state, that is, after they had become less alien, while the latter believed that the removal of legal disabilities was a prerequisite for acculturation, a precondition that would enable the Jews to become more like their neighbors.

To advocates of multiculturalism, this linkage, this insistence on cultural homogeneity, is unacceptable. However, in the context of the time, it represented an advance, a sharp break with the past, when baptism into the Christian faith was the sole avenue to acceptance and the sole cure for what allegedly ailed the Jews, setting them apart from the rest of the Western world. Moreover, while supporters of emancipation conceded that Jewish morals and customs were corrupt and in

need of reformation, they did not attribute this to the Jews' religion or any imagined spiritual or corporeal essence. Rather, good children of the Enlightenment that they were, they believed that if Jews were un-social, unproductive, and immoral, it was because Christian misgovernment, ill-will, and ill-treatment had made them that way. In 1781, in one of the earliest tracts urging the integration of Jews into state and society, the Prussian bureaucrat Christian Wilhelm Dohm made this explicit: "Everything the Jews are blamed for is caused by the political conditions under which they now live, and any other group of men, under such conditions, would be guilty of identical errors."³ Central to this line of reasoning was the conviction that human character was not fixed but plastic and subject to environmental influence. Buoyant about the future and firm in their faith in human perfectibility, liberals and enlightened bureaucrats believed that toleration would cleanse the Jews of their "errors" and "ills," rendering them more like everyone else.

While there was agreement that emancipation required an overhaul of Jewish behavior and identity, there was no agreement—not even much discussion—about the parameters of this transformation. Indeed, in retrospect, the vagueness of what was demanded of the Jews is striking. What did proponents of their transformation mean when they called for their reformation, regeneration, enlightenment, or amalgamation? At a minimum, they intended that Jews should speak and dress like other citizens, adopt secular education and culture, and identify with their countries of residence, becoming law-abiding, patriotic, productive citizens. About these matters, there was little confusion. But more than this was expected. The "clannishness" or "tribalism" of the Jews, their concentration in commerce and finance, and their adherence to "backward" religious customs, including dietary laws that were believed to hinder social intercourse—these too were considered ripe for reform. But, again, those who demanded the reformation of the Jews failed to detail what they considered sufficient change and to establish criteria to measure it. For example, did the evolution of street traders into shopkeepers, wholesale merchants, and department store magnates meet their expectations? Or did it demonstrate emancipation's failure, that is, the Jews' inability to escape trade (with its allegedly deleterious impact on character and morals) even when given the freedom to do so?

Just as striking was the failure of both Jews and Christians to envision the final aim of Jewish acculturation and integration, to describe in even broad strokes the hoped-for outcome of emancipation.⁴ Were

Jews to toil in fields, factories, and workshops in the same proportion as Christians? Were they to scatter throughout the land, taking up residence in every town and village? Were they to mix socially with Christians as much as they did with their own kind? Were they to find husbands and wives outside the tribal fold? Were they, in time, to lose all external marks of Jewishness and become, in effect, invisible?

However fuzzy their vision of the future, Jews eager to leave “the ghetto” believed they needed to mute or abandon the marks of Jewish particularism. Obtaining emancipation, social acceptance, and civic respect, the argument went, required them to broaden their cultural horizons, throw off outworn habits, modernize their religious practices and beliefs, normalize their occupational structure, and befriend their Christian neighbors and workmates. From the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, Jewish communal leaders who championed integration made the transformation of the Jewish people a central focus of their public activity. Having left “the ghetto” themselves, they created movements (Haskalah, Reform Judaism, *Wissenschaft des Judentums*) and institutions (charity and trade schools, modern seminaries, settlement houses, youth clubs) to hasten the transformation of the less acculturated Jewish masses, for they were convinced that their own fate was tied to the state of the Jewish population as a whole. By erecting institutions to modernize Jewish life, they also hoped to make a public statement about the willingness—indeed, eagerness—of the Jews to abandon old habits and acquire new ones.

The transformation of Jewish life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not a uniform process. Its pace varied from state to state and from region to region. In general, it was more rapid, sweeping up larger numbers of Jews, in liberal, *laissez-faire*, industrializing states (such as Great Britain and the United States) than in societies where noble *latifundia*, old-regime political structures, and premodern values remained dominant (such as Poland and Russia). Changes in Jewish life were also more far-reaching and more rapid in urban centers than in small towns and villages. (It should be remembered that on the eve of the modern period most European Jews did not live in large cities.)

Yet, wherever change occurred, it failed to uproot well-entrenched views about Jewish otherness, neither erasing the stigma of Jewishness nor ushering in an era of unconditional social acceptance. Jews became “less Jewish” but opposition to their full acceptance persisted. Some claimed this was because Jews were still “too Jewish”: they had changed too little, thus failing to uphold their end of the emancipation contract. From a later vantage point, however, it seems that no

amount of change would have been sufficient to undo the legacy of centuries of Christian contempt and disparagement. In medieval and early modern Europe, Jews occupied a disproportionate amount of space in the Christian imagination. Whatever their position was in fact, they were invariably the imaginative other, the standard by which what was Christian (and good) was measured, the collective embodiment of all manner of unpleasant habits and traits, the readily available screen on which Christians projected their fears and anxieties. While the Enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolutions did much to undermine the doctrinal foundations of Christianity, which had, of course, initiated the tradition of viewing Jews as demonic outsiders, they did not eliminate the stigma attached to Jewishness. The perception that Jews were different in kind from non-Jews was too well entrenched, too rooted in Western culture and thought, to disappear when the religious doctrines that engendered it in the first place weakened.

As a result, Jews everywhere, even in liberal states like Britain, France, and the United States, found that being Jewish remained problematic to one degree or another. In the best circumstances, Jews still faced social discrimination and cultural stigmatization; in the worst, legal disabilities, verbal abuse, and physical violence. Most Jews in Europe and America, whether attached to tradition or not, were able to tolerate the exclusion and stigmatization that accompanied their entry into the modern world, largely because they were still embedded in Jewish social and kinship networks that nourished and satisfied their material and emotional needs. Their sense of self-worth was linked to what Jews, not non-Jews, thought of them. To be sure, the hostility of non-Jews, whatever forms it took, was troublesome and could be disruptive or painful. Indeed, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Western Jewish leaders acted to combat antisemitism by establishing defense organizations, such as the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* in Germany and the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai B'rith in the United States. But, finally, for most Jews whatever intolerance persisted was tolerable.

Still, there was a minority of Jews in all lands who were unwilling or unable to endure the burden of being Jewish. Driven by hunger or ambition, in search of fame or status, peace of mind or even a roof over their heads, they sought relief in *radical* assimilation, that is, they ceased to identify themselves as Jews and cut their ties to Judaism and the Jewish community. The most common form of escape was conversion to Christianity, but there were other forms of radical assimilation

as well. In some liberal states, Jews were able to take Christian spouses and merge into non-Jewish circles without being baptized. In Central Europe, it became possible for Jews to secede from the state-sponsored *Gemeinden* without joining a Christian denomination and to declare themselves officially *konfessionslos*. Other radical assimilationists took more imaginative paths, burying their Jewishness in the cause of socialism, science, or art. Still others dreamed of or even created universalistic, nonrevealed syncretic religions, of which the Ethical Culture movement in the United States was the most successful example. Common to all of these strategies, however different from each other, was the desire to shed the stigma of Jewishness, to be free, once and for all, of a highly charged, troublesome label. All were responses to the same condition—the burden of Jewishness—and, in this sense, they constitute a distinct, coherent phenomenon.

This book is an account of radical assimilation, a history of Jews who did not want to be Jews, in Europe and North America from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. It casts its geographic net wide, drawing on the experience of Jews in lands with very different political systems, cultural traditions, and socioeconomic structures. It considers leakage from the Jewish community in settings as diverse as Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, London, and New York. It does not, however, move methodically from decade to decade and from country to country, bringing into focus the extent and character of conversion at all times and in all places. This kind of account would be tedious to read and, moreover, impossible to write, given the evidence, which at times is episodic and anecdotal. There is another reason, as well, that this account is not strictly chronological. Jewish history in Europe and America did not unfold in a uniform way and at a uniform pace. The status of Jews in the czarist empire in the early nineteenth century, for example, little resembled the status of Jews in Great Britain and the United States at the time, and thus conversions in the former were more “medieval” than “modern” in regard to the circumstances in which they occurred.

The flight from Jewishness is not a staple of Jewish historical writing⁵ and, it could be argued, is marginal or even irrelevant to its central themes. After all, Jews who did not want to be Jews and separated themselves (or at least tried to) from other Jews were, quite literally, on the periphery of Jewish communal life, if not altogether outside it. They were either indifferent to the future of Jewry or zealous for its demise. Some were rabid Jew-haters; others blended successfully into non-Jewish society and never looked back. From this perspective, it

follows that radical assimilation falls outside the orbit of Jewish history or, at best, that it is a minor footnote to it. Why then reintroduce converts and other radical assimilationists into the historiographical fold from which they earlier fled? My answer is that leakage was not a marginal phenomenon, either in terms of its character or, in a few contexts, in terms of its demographic impact. While the number of Jews who left the fold in any year was never staggeringly high (with one or two exceptions), the cumulative demographic impact was substantial, especially among the wealthy and the well-educated. At the same time, radical assimilation was the most extreme form of strategies—acculturation and integration—that all Jews who entered the modern world pursued. True, converts were aberrant in the sense that they transgressed communal norms, but it is also possible to view them in a different light: not as outsiders, free of all links to other Jews, but as occupants of the far end of a broad spectrum of assimilatory behavior, as actors responding to the same pressures and tensions that bedeviled other Jews. What set them apart from their contemporaries was the radical nature of their response, their search for total rather than partial incorporation into the surrounding society. Their reaction to discrimination and stigmatization differed in degree, not in kind, from that of other acculturated Jews.

The contexts in which radical assimilation occurred—especially those in which it flourished—constitute a central element in this story. Conversion was not a random phenomenon, appearing by chance here and there, in no apparent pattern. Nor was it linked to character “flaws” (cravenness, ambition, cowardice) that were more marked among some groups of Jews than others. It was, rather, determined by how Jews viewed their present and future chances for success and happiness while remaining Jewish. Since their perceptions reflected, in turn, the ebb and flow of antisemitism, the cultural climate of the time, and the flexibility or inflexibility of the social structures that shaped their lives, the study of radical assimilation illuminates far more than Jewish responses to the shortcomings of emancipation. It equally illuminates the history of the states in which Jews lived. It identifies those cultural ideals, social structures, and political systems that allowed Jews to participate extensively in civic and social life without having to obscure or jettison their ties to Judaism and the Jewish community. Conversely, it identifies those settings in which this was difficult or impossible. The study of radical assimilation in historical context, thus, addresses the ongoing debate about the strength of antisemitism in various European states in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth

centuries, particularly the debate about the uniqueness of German antisemitism, a question given new life by the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's controversial best seller *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in 1996.⁶ Unlike conventional studies of antisemitism, which examine its role in politics and high and low culture, this book looks at antisemitism through the eyes of those who were its target and seeks to gauge its force by weighing its impact on their behavior. Acculturated, ambitious Jews who viewed the future pessimistically were more likely to leave the tribal fold than those who remained hopeful about their chances for success.

When earlier generations of Jewish historians wrote about conversion, they tended to judge those who left the fold rather than explore their motives and the circumstances that led to their departure. Moral condemnation, for example, characterized the attitude of Heinrich Graetz (1817–91), the preeminent Jewish historian of the nineteenth century. In his treatment of the salon Jewesses of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Berlin, most of whom became Christians, he vilified their behavior, accusing them of losing their virtue (literally) to the Prussian nobles who visited them. The latter, “the embodiment of selfishness, licentiousness, vice, and depravity,” corrupted and seduced these weak women in the absence of their businessmen husbands. “If the enemies of the Jews had designed to break the power of Israel, they could have discovered no more effectual means than infecting Jewish women with moral depravity, a plan more efficacious than that employed by the Midianites, who weakened the men by immorality.” In a burst of moral indignation, he concluded: “These talented but sinful Jewish women did Judaism a service by becoming Christians.”⁷ While Graetz's condemnation was unusually vigorous, his basic attitude toward those who left the fold was not untypical, then or later. Well into the twentieth century, much that was written about converts was judgmental. Solomon Liptzin (1901–95), writing at midcentury (and very much under the sway of the collapse of emancipation in Germany), suggested that the downfall of these women was their passion to be Germans, “nothing but Germans,” which led them to hurl themselves “madly, hysterically, into the arms of an overidealized German culture.” For him, the damage they did was incalculable: “Their dangerous experiment unleashed forces that raged with undiminished intensity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”⁸ The implication was that these women bore responsibility (by having set a bad example?) for tens of thousands of conversions that occurred in Germany in the decades that followed.

The urge to judge and to entertain is apparent in accounts of well-known converts that were published in Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Historians and journalists—S. L. Tsitron (1860–1930), A. N. Frenk (1863–1924), Shaul Ginsburg (1866–1940), and Matthias Mieses (1885–1945)—published popular works telling the stories of Jews who became famous, or notorious, after becoming Christians.⁹ Their subjects were converts who succeeded as civil servants, industrialists, landowners, writers, intellectuals, academics, and journalists. They included converts who, not content to quit Judaism, became vicious antisemites, like Jacob Brafman (c. 1825–79), author of the most successful anti-Jewish text in Russian history, *The Book of the Kabal* (1869). They included as well converts whose reaction was the opposite, who, having won recognition outside Jewish society, used their influence to defend their former coreligionists in the press and before government officials. Here the classic example is the St. Petersburg semiticist Daniel Khvolson (1819–1911), who became a legend among Russian Jews for denouncing the libel that Jewish ritual required Christian blood.

With their invented dialogue, these tales were also meant to instruct. They recounted ironic twists and tragic ends in the lives of their subjects and linked these to their origins, usually in the *shtetlakh* of the Pale of Settlement. Their message was clear: Baptism failed to wash away the Jewishness of the Jew. Again and again they described how converts were unable to escape their past and shake themselves free of old associations and memories. Like East European Jewish jokes about converts, these stories implied that the ties that bound Jews were racial and/or national, as well as religious. Once a Jew, always a Jew, they suggested. Still, despite their disapproval of conversion, these accounts were not unsympathetic to the converts whose lives they recounted. They praised those who defended their people and took pride in the accomplishments of those who rose to positions of influence under the czars, claiming, in a sense, their successes as Jewish successes, as triumphs that rebounded to the credit of the Jewish people.

It is not my aim to either praise or damn those who left the Jewish fold. My disinterest in criticism stems not from indifference to the fate of the Jewish people but from the conviction that the writing of Jewish history is not well served by those who assign grades, however subtly, to the objects of their research, designating in this instance some as “good” Jews and others as “bad” Jews. Writing Jewish history—indeed, any kind of history—in this way obscures rather than illuminates the past,

turning complex, flesh-and-blood human beings into one-dimensional stick figures. Indignation and self-righteousness have their place in politics, but in historical scholarship they are a liability. Of course, most Jews who broke with Judaism were not “heroic” figures nor were their lives “inspiring”—but all of this is beside the point. They were persons forced to make decisions about their future that, in all likelihood, they would have preferred to avoid in the first place. They faced these decisions because they lived in imperfect societies that, even in the best of circumstances, were hostile or indifferent to the cultivation of Jewish difference. That some Jews believed that shedding their Jewishness would enhance their chances for success and happiness strikes me as more tragic than treasonous, as more an indictment of the societies in which they lived than of their own lack of moral backbone. The task of the historian of radical assimilation is to understand why some Jews converted and others did not and what circumstances shaped their decisions. His or her task is to ask how national context, social status, and gender encouraged or restrained radical assimilation and why it flourished in some periods and not in others.

This is not to say that personality or character was irrelevant to the matter of who left and who remained within the Jewish fold. While social and political forces, economic status, and gender determined those groups within the Jewish population in which conversion was most common, they did not determine which persons within those groups actually left the community. In other words, all persons within a well-defined subset of the Jewish population (bankers, journalists, cattle traders, etc.) did not respond to the same external conditions in the same way. Internal features—emotional needs and drives, personality traits, and mental habits—determined which members of those groups that were at risk in the first place actually left the tribal fold. Although this may seem obvious, it is worth stating because it is relevant to the question of what this study can explain and what it cannot. This account seeks to explain only the external, not internal, determinants of radical assimilation. Why two persons from the same background reacted in different ways to the same challenge is a psychological, not a historical, question. To begin to suggest answers about what kinds of personalities were most responsive to the attractions of conversion would be irresponsible, given how little is known about the emotional makeup of the several hundred thousand Jews who left Judaism in the modern period. Even the large body of work on the psychology of conversion is irrelevant to this account, since it concerns converts who were sincere, that is, who believed in the faith

to which they were converting. Most Jews who became Christians in the modern period, on the other hand, were insincere, by which I mean that they did not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God and the Redeemer and that salvation came through faith in him alone. For them conversion was a strategic or practical move, much like changing a name or altering a nose. Instead of being indifferent Jews who did not attend synagogue, they became indifferent Christians who did not attend church.

Still, there were exceptions—individuals for whom conversion was a religious experience and who became pious, churchgoing Christians. Some of them merged into their newly adopted communities, attracting no further attention, while others became missionaries, controversialists, theologians, and church dignitaries and, by virtue of their Jewish background, attracted a disproportionate amount of attention. The Carmelite nun Edith Stein (1891–1942), who died in a German death camp during World War II, and the archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger (1926–2007), are twentieth-century representatives of this phenomenon. While there is no dearth of writing about Jews like these who distinguished themselves as Christian thinkers and workers, much of it is hagiographic or conversionist in intent. Little of it seeks to understand the historical context that shaped their path from Judaism to Christianity. Moreover, by stressing the spiritual character of their journey, this literature disconnects the experiences of these “exceptions to the rule” from the majority who left Judaism for nonspiritual reasons. Given that most human behavior is overdetermined, it is difficult to believe that the “true believers” were ignorant of the social and emotional advantages of abandoning Judaism. I do not want to argue that their conversions were inauthentic but, rather, that they were driven by a complex of motives, needs, and perceptions. The fact that some Jews saw Judaism in a negative light and Christianity in a positive light was the outcome of historical circumstances, not spiritual yearning and speculation alone. Moreover, even if it were true that these conversions were spiritual transformations pure and simple, exceptional events removed from the common run of human experience, the language the converts used to describe their journey toward Christianity was rooted in the time-bound attitudes of the period. The invidious way in which they contrasted Judaism and Christianity, and the terms they used to disparage the one and exalt the other, emerged from the same negation of Jews and Judaism that motivated strategic conversions. Thus, conversions of “convenience” and conversions of “conviction” were not altogether dissimilar.

This account of radical assimilation does not end with the severing of Jewish ties. While converts and secessionists assumed that their formal break with Jewry ended its relevance to their lives and that henceforth they would be free agents, making their way in the world unencumbered by their past, their hopes were often disappointed. For just as the practice of emancipation fell short of the theory of emancipation, so too radical assimilation often failed to provide the relief it, in theory, promised. As Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81), Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), and thousands of less well-known converts discovered, the world continued to regard them as Jews long after they became Christians. The notion that converts retained remnants of their past was an old one, appearing long before the diffusion of racial thinking in the nineteenth century. Spanish and Portuguese Jews who became Catholics in the late-medieval period (*conversos* or New Christians) were never able to shake the suspicion that they remained attached to their old faith. This accusation was leveled indiscriminately at all *conversos*, both those about whom it was true and those who were sincere in their new faith. Even their descendants several generations later continued to be regarded with suspicion. Converts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often suffered a similar fate. The notion of Jewish difference was too well established in Western thought and sentiment to be washed away at the moment of baptism. When racial thinking became respectable in the nineteenth century, it reinforced notions that were far older, lending them intellectual stature.

The fate of converts was not similar everywhere, however. In some circumstances, radical assimilation was an effective escape from Jewishness, allowing those who pursued it to make their way in the world without hindrance. Indeed, in these cases its success is an obstacle to historical research, since the more effective it was the fewer traces it left in the historical record. The goal of radical assimilationists, after all, was to obscure or erase their origins. Why they succeeded in some periods and places and not in others is another central concern of this book, for the conditions that encouraged defection in the first place were the same as those that later frustrated the hopes of those who chose this path. Ironically, then, in those settings where conversion was most “needed,” it tended to work less effectively than in those where it was less “needed” and thus less common. Radical assimilationists who failed to overcome their Jewishness devised diverse and often creative ways to deal with the problem. Some, like the German industrialist and statesman Walther Rathenau (1867–1922), continued to struggle to distance themselves from the despised minority with

which they were identified and, as proof of their distance from the group, mouthed commonplace anti-Jewish views. Others, like the American art critic and connoisseur Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), embraced the traditions and symbols of the elite that served as their reference group with grotesque enthusiasm. A very few, like Benjamin Disraeli, realizing the futility of making their origins disappear, embraced their Jewishness with a vengeance, transforming it into a badge of honor and status.

Although no taboo on writing about conversion operates in Jewish historical circles, there is one prominent historiographical current that works unintentionally to impede an understanding of its scope and impact. This current, which I have referred to elsewhere as “the legitimization of the diaspora experience,”¹⁰ evolved in response to accusations about Jewish behavior in World War II and Jewish political leadership in the half century or so before the war. In the mid-1960s, in the wake of attacks on the putative absence of Jewish resistance during the war and political ineptitude beforehand, historians began to reevaluate diaspora political behavior. One school concluded that the leaders of diaspora communities in the West responded with wisdom and honor to the rise of political antisemitism, displaying, as one historian wrote in regard to the liberal defense campaign in Imperial Germany, “the qualities of courage, self-confidence, sound political judgment, and political militancy.”¹¹ This reevaluation initiated, in turn, a far-reaching reassessment of how diaspora Jewish communities fared between emancipation and World War II. While in no sense hostile to the State of Israel, the historians who undertook this work believed that Zionist historiography, whose influence was at its zenith then, distorted the record of diaspora life, exaggerating its dissolution and decay and the cravenness and ineptitude of its leaders. In reaction, they celebrated the tenacity of Western Jews in preserving their Jewishness in the face of countervailing assimilatory forces. They emphasized the creativity of Western Jews in meeting the challenges of living in open societies by developing new forms of Jewish identity and new institutions to preserve and express them. They noted that, despite the decline of religious practice and knowledge, Western Jews remained a distinctive, cohesive group with patterns of behavior that set them off from the rest of the population. They stressed transformation rather than decline, continuity rather than disjuncture, cohesion rather than dissolution, change rather than crisis. In their work, emancipation, acculturation, and integration were serious challenges, rather than fatal blows, to the perpetuation of Jewish identity in the West.

This interpretation was a welcome correction to the imbalance of Zionist historiography. However, as is more often the case than not, in undermining the one-sidedness of the then regnant view, it erected a view that was equally one-sided. Historians who highlighted the vitality of diaspora Jewish life tended to ignore or minimize evidence regarding the weakening of Jewish ties and the toll that radical assimilation took. They accentuated the positive and, like those about whom they wrote, took little notice of trends that were moving in the opposite direction and that, in the long run, worked against the maintenance of ethnic cohesion. In particular, they showed little interest in the fate of the children and grandchildren of those Jews whose accomplishments they celebrated, neglecting to ask whether they remained in the fold or not. I do not intend in this account of radical assimilation to deny the accomplishments of European and American Jewish communities in meeting new challenges, but, rather, to suggest that their history was more complex than often acknowledged. If some Jews forged new ways of being Jewish, others drifted into indifference or formally cut their communal ties. No single unidirectional trend held sway; transformation *and* dissolution were at work concurrently. However, the cumulative impact of the latter becomes visible only when drift and defection are seen in multigenerational perspective, that is, when the fate of Jewish attachments is studied over succeeding generations. This book seeks to redress the imbalance of much recent writing about modern Jewish communities by highlighting the limitations of emancipation and integration, specifically the tenacity of reservations about Jews and the emotional hardship this imposed on Jews who yearned for acceptance and inclusion. Even in the most liberal states, the persistent stigmatization of Jewishness took a toll—a toll, I argue, that historians have not yet fully acknowledged.

A word about the evidence on which this account is based. Although this book is comparative in its approach, highlighting how different circumstances encouraged different behaviors, the evidence it uses is not consistently comparable. In general, while statistical data regarding conversion and secession exist for Central and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Europe, there is no equivalent body of quantitative evidence for Western Europe and the United States. The reason for this is simple. In Central and Eastern Europe, church and state were linked, as were religious and civil status. The state monitored the movement of its citizens/subjects from one religion to another and, for the most part, required them to belong to a recognized confession. In Western

Europe and the United States, on the other hand, the state took little interest in the religious affiliation of its citizens. It did not require them to affiliate with a religious community or register when they left one and joined another. The only statistics on conversion in the liberal states of the West come from missionary sources, and they are unsatisfactory for several reasons. First, missionaries were responsible for only a minority of conversions wherever they operated. Second, missionaries worked largely among the Jewish poor, and thus the converts they made were unrepresentative in terms of their social background. And third, mission-made converts were often unreliable Christians. Some returned to Judaism when they were on their feet again, while others were “professional” converts—persons who converted multiple times (usually in different towns) for material ends.

In the absence of conversion statistics for liberal states, the historian must turn to nonquantitative evidence, drawing information about the scope and character of radical assimilation from “anecdotal” or “literary” sources: memoirs, diaries, correspondence, newspapers, journals, sermons, tracts, and novels. Obviously, the picture that can be drawn on the basis of this material will lack the sharpness of one resting on statistical data. But, in the absence of statistical data, there is no alternative, other than giving up the project altogether. This also means that, in comparing conversion in liberal and illiberal states, the evidence on each side of the comparison will not be similar in character. I do not believe this is an insurmountable obstacle. The nonquantitative evidence is abundant and, in general, unambiguous. Jews who did not want to be Jews left an impressive paper trail.

Readers of this book will notice that its scope, while broad, is not comprehensive. I have little or nothing to say about the phenomena of conversion and radical assimilation in states with small Jewish populations, such as Switzerland, Italy, and the Scandinavian countries, or in French and British enclaves outside Europe, such as Algeria, South Africa, and Australia. Similarly, I have not extended my research to include Jewish communities in Canada and Latin America. My reason for this is pragmatic. This book is long enough as it is. There is also a methodological reason for excluding colonial settings. The relations among Jews, Europeans, and the indigenous populations were fundamentally different from those between Jews and Christians in Europe and the United States. Similarly, I have not touched on the not-unknown phenomenon of Jews becoming Muslims in the lands of Islam. This is a topic worth exploring but it requires a historian with training and expertise that are different from mine.

One final point: The paths out of Judaism and Jewishness were several, and not all were uniformly and consistently available, and not all ended with the same results. Understanding why one path was available in Victorian London and unavailable in Habsburg Vienna, for example, is critical to this account. Thus, I have carefully chosen the words I use in discussing how and why Jews cut their ties to their religion and community. *Radical assimilation* is an umbrella term, referring to all the routes Jews traveled to lose their Jewishness, whether that was their intention or not. *Conversion* refers to the religious act of formally embracing Christianity. *Secession*, on the other hand, refers to the act of legally withdrawing from the Jewish community—whether or not conversion to Christianity followed. This form of radical assimilation was available only in Central Europe and only from the late nineteenth century on. *Intermarriage* refers to the union between a Christian and Jew. The marriage between a baptized Jew and a Christian or between a Jew and a former Christian is not an instance of intermarriage. Legally and religiously, these are endogamous unions. In general, intermarriage was possible only where civil marriage was available, as in France, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. *Passing* refers to the attempt to flee the Jewish community by assuming a non-Jewish identity and hiding evidence of a Jewish birth and upbringing. In most cases, Jews who attempted passing never bothered to convert, since conversion would have acknowledged that they had once been Jews. Why these distinctions matter will become clear in the chapters that follow.