

## Introduction



This is a book about beauty, about style, about appearance. It is about the German-Jewish quest to be seen as dignified, as refined, as physically appealing. Our story starts in the late eighteenth century, when the Jewish battle for social acceptance and legal emancipation began, and continues through to the late nineteenth century with the explosion of nationalism, mass politics, and racial antisemitism in Germany. In the late eighteenth century, German Jewry began to develop a new and distinctive sense of self, one predicated on its adoption of German language and culture. This was followed in the nineteenth century by the advent of new forms of Judaism, the turn to Jewish scholarship, the acquisition of university education, and the emergence of Jews into the middle classes. All of these innovations intended to or served to change the image and appearance of Jews and Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

One aspect of the great cultural transformation of German Jewry was the special place of honor it accorded medieval Spanish Jewry. Over that span of one hundred years, what began as respect for Sephardic culture developed into adulation, and it is my contention that this sentiment became a constitutive element of German-Jewish self-perception, for this celebration of Sephardic Jewry led simultaneously to a self-critique, often a very harsh one, of Ashkenazic culture. In the eighteenth century German Jewry became increasingly and self-consciously distinct from Polish Jewry. As it went on to form a new type of Ashkenazic culture, the superiority that certain communal leaders claimed was a hallmark of Sephardic civilization offered an ideal that proved inspirational to the shapers of modern German-Jewish identity. I further argue that the intricately interdependent ideas about the Ashkenazic self and the Sephardic Other produced a set of assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices that were marshaled in the process of German-Jewish self-actualization and self-fashioning. The program of remaking German-Jewish aesthetics rested upon establishing a hard cultural line of demarcation between the Jewries of Germany and Poland and invoking the usable and easy-to-celebrate aspects of medieval Sephardic culture, which German Jews considered exemplary. This is the story this book seeks to tell.

From the outset, let me state that I am not suggesting that German Jews gave constant thought to Sephardic Jewry, and I am certainly not suggesting they wanted to imitate them. In fact, given that Christian commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently dismissed Jews as “Asiatic” or “Oriental,” the majority of German Jews were dedicated to a

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process of occidentalization, not orientalization, and probably paid only scant attention, if any at all, to the Jews of Muslim Spain. What I am saying, however, is that those elites who molded Jewish popular opinion in Germany, those who shaped self-perceptions and created a narrative to go along with those sentiments, did think about medieval Iberian Jewry a lot, and those thoughts were almost always positive. The rays of Spanish Jewry's Golden Age continued to shine long after that community's tragic end, and it may be argued that those rays enjoyed their greatest luminosity in modern Germany.

To a great extent, our own perception of medieval Sephardic Jewry is a cultural legacy bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century German Jews, for their scholarship and popular culture worked in tandem to produce a set of representative images that have enjoyed remarkable staying power, right down to our own day. It was a non-Jewish scholar, the Lutheran theologian and Christian Hebraist Franz Delitzsch, who coined the term "Golden Age" to describe what he said was the period in Spain when "Jewish scholarship and art reached its highest glory." Yet it was the abundant use of the expression in the popular and scholarly discourse of German Jews that made for both its normative use and the nearly universal acceptance of its facticity.<sup>2</sup>

If one could play a retroactive word-association game with nineteenth-century German Jews, the following would have been some of the words and names uttered in response to "Sephardic Jewry": Golden Age, Hebrew poetry, rationalist philosophy, reason, tolerance, openness, Ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, and Maimonides. If they were then asked to respond to the term "Ashkenazic Jewry," they would surely have mentioned the Crusades, blood libel, ritual murder, martyrdom, intolerance, insularity, superstition, Hasidism, and Yiddish. Beyond Rashi, it would be hard to imagine a modern, secular German Jew naming another medieval rabbi from either Germany or Poland. Every association our German-Jewish participant in this game made about Sephardic Jewry was positive, while nearly every association for Ashkenazic Jewry was negative. This is not to say there is no element of truth in any of these signifiers. Though the intellectual and vernacular cultures of German Jewry greatly exaggerated the extent of tolerance that Iberian Islam extended to medieval Jews, it seems to have been a less oppressive, restrictive, and violent environment than that which Jews experienced in Christian Europe. For example, Jews enjoyed greater economic freedom under Islam, ritual murder charges were invented and flourished in Christian Europe and not in the Islamic orbit, while rationalist philosophy was the preserve of Sephardic, not Ashkenazic, intellectuals. Hebrew grammarians of the first rank were to be found in Spain and to a lesser, or a less well-known, extent in Central and Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> However, the totalizing superficiality of popular perceptions, first crafted, as I will argue, by German Ashkenazic communal elites and intellectuals, fails to recognize uncomfort-

able realities, principal among them that “the aristocratic bearing of a select class of courtiers and poets . . . should not blind us to the reality that this tightly knit circle of leaders and aspirants to power was neither the whole of Spanish Jewish history nor of Spanish Jewish society. Their gilded moments of the tenth and eleventh century are but a brief chapter in a longer saga.”<sup>4</sup>

Also only rarely highlighted was the fact that like the Jews of Spain those of medieval Ashkenaz also had their Hebrew poets, grammarians, exegetes, distinguished political representatives, and physicians, who served Crown and Christian commoner alike.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the views of those Jews who shaped German-Jewish culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Jewish affinity for Muslim culture was not universally shared by all medieval Spanish Jews. Even among Sephardic elites, there was vehement rejection of rationalist metaphysics, which, they held, was the result of Islam’s nefarious influence. There was also considerable Jewish disdain for Islam itself, with many Spanish Jews dismissing it as nothing but idolatry.<sup>6</sup> Harmony, let alone a Muslim-Jewish symbiosis, was far from the norm, and even though some nineteenth-century German-Jewish scholars recognized this, the more historically accurate picture, which included considerable social coercion and theological friction, hardly blurred the romantic portrait they likewise painted.<sup>7</sup>

Perception proved more powerful than reality, and, beginning in the eighteenth century, German Jews saw in the Sephardim of the Golden Age Jews who possessed what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “cultural capital.” As he defined the term, it referred to “all the goods material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation.”<sup>8</sup> The emerging middle- and upper-class Jews of eighteenth-century Berlin saw in the Jews of medieval Spain a community that was culturally wealthy, established, and admired by Gentile elites. As evaluated by German Jews, Sephardic “cultural capital” also turned the Jews of Spain into a living expression of Jewish “symbolic capital” and hence generated the idea that they were an ideal community. Endowed with honor and prestige, as befitting their status vis-à-vis other Jewish communities, the Sephardim were a “cultural nobility,” to again borrow from Bourdieu, and the measure against which German Jews assessed their own, Ashkenazic self-worth.<sup>9</sup> In what follows we will see how their own forebears, medieval Ashkenazic Jewry, were assayed and found, by comparison, to be of little cultural value. Moreover, it was claimed, they had bequeathed their particular form of cultural penury to their descendents in Germany and Poland. Modern German Jewry sought to shake off that legacy and rid itself of that inheritance by amassing its own cultural capital. The great investment in that project made by maskilim, community leaders, and then the great majority of German Jews would, it was hoped, be transformed into a kind of symbolic capital whereby they

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would now assume the mantle of prestige and recognition that had once been the possession of Sephardic Jewry.

A central component of the belief system that saw German Jewry value so highly the cultural and symbolic capital of the Sephardim and undervalue that of the Ashkenazim turned on aesthetics and gave rise to the belief that the Sephardim were the most beautiful Jews, and that their culture was aesthetically superior to that of the Ashkenazim. This notion will be our particular focus in this study. We begin in the eighteenth century because that was the moment when appearances first began to matter to German Jews. Long considered to be in religious and thus moral error, Jews faced a new charge at this time, namely, that they were in aesthetic error. In response, the upper stratum of that community began to adopt what the literary theorist Terry Eagleton has called the “ideology of the aesthetic.” Speaking principally about eighteenth-century German thought, Eagleton notes that, “in this particular epoch of class-society, with the emergence of the early bourgeoisie, aesthetic concepts (some of them of distinguished historical pedigree) begin to play, however tacitly, an unusually central, intensive part in the constitution of a dominant ideology.” In making this claim, Eagleton is principally referring to systems of philosophical thought concerned with art writ large. That is less the case with contemporaneous Jewish thought, for in formulating an ideology of aesthetics, the Jewish Brahmins of Berlin were concerned with the practical application of new ideas about aesthetics as opposed to speculative consideration about them. Eagleton is surely right to note that “aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body. In its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, the term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought.”<sup>10</sup> Increasing numbers of German Jews not only preached the ideology of aesthetics but practiced it as well.

Critical theorists have long pointed to the link between aesthetics and politics, some seeing in it an explanatory device for the appeal of fascism, with others seeing it, according to historian Martin Jay, in opposing terms; in this alternative view, “bourgeois culture at its height rather than at its moment of seeming decay is . . . taken as a point of departure for aestheticized politics.”<sup>11</sup> In introducing his subject, Eagleton offers the disclaimer that he does “not really intend to suggest that the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie assembled around a table over their claret to dream up the concept of the aesthetic as a solution to their political dilemmas.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the bourgeois circles of which Eagleton speaks, I will argue that the upper German-Jewish bourgeoisie did assemble, at times physically, at other times through the circulation of texts and letters, to discuss Jewish appearances both for their own sake and “as a solution to their political dilemmas.” In doing so, they sought to sculpt a specifically new Ashkenazic aesthetic, tak-

ing conscious steps to implement it with a view to becoming refined, cultured, and even beautiful. The larger goal of their “aestheticized politics” was to be deemed worthy of political emancipation and social acceptance. What follows is an exploration of the ways German Jews alternately internalized, rejected, parsed, and negotiated ideas and charges about their own aesthetics. It is about the strategies they adopted to cultivate their aesthetic selves. As such, this is not a study about Sephardic Jewry. Rather, it is about the construction of a particular form of modern Ashkenazic identity, that of the German variety, and the way the trope of the beautiful Sephardic Jew was deployed in the service of German-Jewish identity formation.

Until the modern period there is no evidence that Jews were ever really concerned with, let alone embarrassed by, their particular aesthetic. Their corporeal, sartorial, and linguistic selves were not as they were as a matter of chance but rather were the result of a highly regulated set of proscriptions all considered to be in accordance with either Jewish law, deeply ingrained custom, or social necessity. Biblical laws that regulated everything from permissible fabrics to facial hair were further supplemented over the centuries by a raft of sumptuary laws that regulated Jewish behaviors and appearance. Largely unenforceable and frequently honored in the breach, these laws nevertheless represented a Jewish behavioral and aesthetic ideal.<sup>13</sup>

Even Jewish ideas of beauty and ugliness were shaped by an idealized commitment to the Law. The Jewish masculine ideal, so very different from that of the Christian, revered the pale-skinned, gentle Torah scholar while reviling the ruddy-cheeked, unbooked, Gentile boy, his complexion a tell-tale sign of his frivolous, outdoor ways. As for their speech, Jews prayed in the very same language that God spoke, and Ashkenazim conducted their daily affairs, including Torah study, in Yiddish, a language that made quotidian the admonitions of the prophets and the wisdom of the sages. There was nothing to be ashamed of, for the Jews appeared exactly as the Lord had commanded them to look. God was the ultimate arbiter of Jewish style.

In the eighteenth century, this long-standing Jewish accommodation to God’s fashion sense began to break down. In Germany, the embourgeoisement of Jews was coterminous with the drawn-out process of Jewish emancipation. Many members of the Jewish upper classes began to adopt secular lifestyles and cultivate bourgeois tastes and sensibilities in the hope that in so doing they would come to be considered Germans. Increasing inattentiveness to Jewish ritual as well as certain aspects of popular Jewish culture were likewise losing their hold on this social stratum. Knowledge of Hebrew was in sharp decline, and what would become a long-running assault on the Yiddish language began with German maskilim. Sartorially, Jewish men were increasingly clean-shaven, and traditional Jewish dress was abandoned in favor of contemporary fashions. Writing about eighteenth-century England, the historian Dror Wahrman has observed that “fashion signified the

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constant manufacturing and remanufacturing of identity through clothes.”<sup>14</sup> This applies to German Jews as well. Thanks to changes in dress and language, they came to increasingly look and sound more and more like their Christian neighbors.

These cultural transformations were hastened and intensified by increasing fraternization between upper-class Jews and non-Jews.<sup>15</sup> Exposure to the latter’s culture was intoxicating, leaving Jews full of both admiration and desire. Among Jewish social elites in Central Europe, that exposure to bourgeois culture occasioned among them a crisis of aesthetic confidence. Self-doubt turned into self-scrutiny, and nearly every aesthetic particularity, corporeal and otherwise, was examined. Ashkenazic accents, languages, cognitive capacities, posture, deportment, and even history itself were examined and evaluated according to a non-Jewish scale of aesthetic worth. In almost all categories, Jews found themselves to be deficient. These beliefs made German Jews hyper-self-conscious, acutely aware of how they sounded, how they looked, and how they carried themselves. The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) characterized the dominant intellectual imperative of the age in which he lived when he declared, “Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit,” while the romantic poet and literary critic Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) pithily echoed Kant, announcing, “One cannot be critical enough.”<sup>16</sup> For German Jews at this time, Schlegel’s dictum might well be paraphrased: “One cannot be self-critical enough.”

What made Jewish self-criticism so acute in Germany has to do with the quest for civic equality and social acceptance. In contrast to developments in France, Jewish emancipation in Germany was not the result of legislative action in the context of political and social revolution. Rather, emancipation in Germany was piecemeal, an uneven process that entailed a carrot-and-stick approach whereby increasing liberty was to be the reward for Jewish self-improvement. Of course “self-improvement” was never a quantifiable category of analysis. When was enough enough? Neither Germans nor Jews really knew the answer. In this environment, appearances, physical as well as moral, counted for much. Outward signs became critical markers of change, and thus German Jews, prior to emancipation, and in fact thereafter, felt themselves to be under surveillance, with Germans looking for signs of positive change and Jews seeking to trumpet the actualization of such.

Of course, Jews have not been the only minority group subject to the watchful, judgmental eye of the majority. Here we can turn with profit to the African American historian, public intellectual, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, for he provides us with a theoretical underpinning that helps explain the responses of German Jews to the cold stare of the majority at the dawn of emancipation. In 1903 Du Bois published his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, wherein he developed his theory of “double

consciousness,” which he defined as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” The consequence of this is that “one ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>17</sup> In speaking so poignantly about his own people and their particular suffering, Du Bois gave voice to the dilemma of all minorities seeking acceptance on the one hand while seeking to avoid self-effacement on the other. If we exchange the words “American” and “Negro” for “German” and “Jew,” Du Bois provides us with the critical tools with which to come to a better understanding of the dilemma that manifested itself in what was at times a painful expression of German-Jewish “double consciousness.”

Du Bois was very clear that the “American Negro” did not wish to disappear but rather sought “to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” His was not so much an act of being as one of becoming. It was about fashioning a new identity, one that was composed out of the bifurcated self. The story told in this book maps onto the Du Boisean ideal, for it seeks to explicate the process by which German Jewry sought to remake itself, in response to the self-perception that its aesthetic debasement disqualified it from self-fulfillment and acceptance by the dominant society. What held true for the African American was equally applicable to the German Jew: “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.”<sup>18</sup> For both African Americans and German Jews, the juggling act was made all the more difficult because of the surveillance that comes with “double consciousness.” Excessive scrutiny, or at least the sense that one was being constantly observed, bred an acute self-consciousness.

Over the century or so covered by this book, German Jews underwent a radical aesthetic transformation, largely in accordance with new tastes, sensibilities, styles, and fashions. Those changes were determined by many things including then-current theories of language and rhetoric, new musical tastes, emerging architectural styles, the Protestant worship service, the internalization of antisemitic tropes about Jewish physicality, and new ways of writing Jewish history that served to identify those moments in the past when Jews led aesthetically exemplary lives and when they did not.

Across the German-Jewish social and cultural spectrum, the aesthetic transformation was informed by a celebration of all things Sephardic. Our focus is on Ashkenazic perceptions of Sephardic appearance, and we will see how, in both high and vernacular Jewish culture, a portrait was drawn of

both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews that promoted an image of the former as authentic, desirable, attractive, and worthy of emulation, while the culture of Ashkenaz was most frequently considered regrettable and in need of radical correction. To repeat, this phenomenon did not manifest itself in some form of German-Jewish Kabuki where they pretended to be that which they were not. Their goal was to become the best German Jews they could be. However, what it does mean is that with the dissolution in the eighteenth century of what might be considered a pan-Ashkenazic culture, German Jewry struggled with the felt need to distinguish itself from the rest of Ashkenazic Jewry, namely, their brethren to the East, and they enlisted the Sephardim to help them achieve their liberation.

The relationship of German to Polish Jewry is at the core of our story. Freud coined the term “narcissism of small differences” to describe the process whereby one nation or ethnic group distinguishes itself from their nearly identical neighbors by highlighting distinctions between the groups. For German and Eastern European Jews, what had been a shared religious culture, a shared vernacular language (Yiddish), as well as commercial and familial links, began to unravel in the late 1700s, and the uneven, sometimes slower, sometimes faster, but unmistakable trend toward differentiation and separation set in. To be sure, there had always been regional differences in religious customs, foods, and pronunciation of Hebrew and Yiddish between German Jewry and Eastern European Jewry, as well as within those respective communities. However, it is also true that in the realm of Jewish folk culture, those differences never impeded mutual intelligibility. Indeed, depending on geographic location, German Jews retained many Eastern European Jewish traits, while Eastern European Jewish culture exhibited many Western forms. This syncretism continued into the twentieth century. As historian Steven Lowenstein has observed, “Whatever the differences, German and Polish Jewish folk cultures were more similar to each other than either were to the folk cultures of Jews in southern Europe or in the Muslim world.”<sup>19</sup>

However, as German and Eastern European Jewry began to drift apart in the eighteenth century, the two most visible markers of that separation, the advent of Hasidism—which never appeared as a mass movement in Germany and, by contrast, swept Poland by storm—and the continued use of Yiddish in Eastern Europe along with its slow but steady abandonment in Germany and the adoption of German in its stead, meant the emergence of two distinct forms of Ashkenazic culture.<sup>20</sup> Two further developments brought the real differences between German and Polish Jewry into sharp relief. They were the adoption of Gentile high culture among German Jews and their greater economic success, which saw them rise into the middle class, while the majority of Eastern European Jews did not aspire to Polish



culture and remained mired in poverty, just as Poland itself did not enjoy the level of affluence found in the West. What had once been the narcissism of small differences now became that of big ones, as German Jews became vigilant practitioners of a cultural politics of Jewish difference. In fact they brought into microcosmic relief an intra-Jewish version of the larger syndrome Du Bois described. However, where the analogy meets its limits is in the fact that in myriad ways, both subtle and obvious, by constantly reaffirming the distinction between German and Polish Jewry, I would argue, they inadvertently instantiated the connectedness between the two communities.

The most important distinction was that of language, a theme that will recur throughout this study. The proximity of German to Yiddish explains what made the Jewish enlighteners of eighteenth-century Berlin disparage it so, leaving behind them a sad legacy of prejudice. It is also what made them such staunch advocates of German. For other large Ashkenazic communities that traced their roots to Eastern Europe, be it Anglo or American Jewry, English was so far removed from Yiddish that the relationship between the respective speakers of these languages was not especially fraught. By contrast, the shame and embarrassment that German Jews felt toward Eastern European Jews, feelings that were exacerbated by the physical proximity of Germany to Poland and the presence of Eastern European Jews in Germany, were especially keen. The fear that one's roots would be uncovered by the presence of Eastern European Jews in Germany, or just the very reminder that there had once been a pan-Ashkenazic culture, led to discomfort and protestations of difference that were heard more frequently and more loudly in Germany than elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

The insecurity born of shared culture and in many cases origins, and made most manifest by language, was extended to other expressive forms, principally body language. The Herderian idea that the *Volksgeist*, or spirit of the nation, resides in language meant that the way one spoke was indicative of much more than a mere mode of communication. Some of the cultural critics we will encounter in this study operated from the premise that language reflected inner character and morality. It also reflected the extent to which Jews interacted with the world beyond the Jewish community. Indeed language was constitutive as well as determinative of aesthetics. Since these ideas appeared around the same time that the quest for Jewish emancipation in Germany began, aesthetics came to play a central role in the cultural transformation of German Jewry.

It was in the context of the split between German and Polish Jewry that German Jewry turned to the medieval Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, for their overall aesthetic bespoke a Jewish community whose sounds, appearance, comportment, and levels of cognition revealed a *Volksgeist* that had been forged from a sparkling yet strong alloy of Jewish and Spanish culture.

It was an experiment that had taken place in the laboratory that was Muslim Spain, where, it was believed, Jews, Muslims, and Christians thrived together in harmony.

The adulation of the Sephardim emerges during the era of romanticism and may be considered a central element of that movement's early Jewish incarnation. Romanticism spanned the period from the late eighteenth century until the 1830s and challenged some of the fundamental tenets of the Enlightenment, especially the latter's devotion to neoclassicism and its negative view of religious enthusiasm, as well as history—in particular the Middle Ages, which it dismissed as a time of barbarism and ignorance. It rejected the Enlightenment's drive to understand natural law, politics, and social relations in terms of systems, order, hierarchies, and classification, as static entities untouched by history. Instead, romanticism stressed a dynamic world of possibility, progress, intuition, and the importance of history.<sup>22</sup> It also cultivated what scholars of romanticism refer to as "sensibility," a term used to denote "sensitivity or emotional responsiveness, bordering on sentimentalism."<sup>23</sup> However, despite these real differences, romanticism actually shared important features with the Enlightenment: it was not an enemy of reason; it likewise sought to weed out superstition; it opposed religious obscurantism as well as political injustice and disorder. Among German Jews, the cultural, economic, social, and religious transformations that began in the late eighteenth century and took hold by the mid-nineteenth were rooted in reason, a devotion to history, and a profound desire to do away with the discrimination Jews faced in nearly every sphere of life.

A notoriously difficult term to define with any precision, "romanticism" has accrued as many definitions as there have been commentators on the subject.<sup>24</sup> The philosopher Isaiah Berlin has given us numerous working definitions of romanticism, including this particularly apt one: "It is nostalgia, it is reverie, it is intoxicating dreams, it is sweet melancholy and bitter melancholy, solitude, the sufferings of exile, the sense of alienation, roaming in remote places, especially the East, and in remote times, especially the Middle Ages."<sup>25</sup> For those German Jews who sought a palatable, domesticated, and glorious medieval past, Iberian Jewry answered their need for "intoxicating dreams" that emanated from the East, and certainly no Jewish community better conjured up positive feelings of "nostalgia" or more completely exemplified "the sufferings of exile" than did the Sephardim.

German Jews do not appear to have been swept up by romanticism, nor did they produce any romantic poets or artists—Heinrich Heine may perhaps be considered an exception to the rule. What can be claimed is that to sing the praises of Sephardic beauty to the extent that German Jewry did and simultaneously decry the aesthetics of Ashkenazic culture was to ride the wave of intense emotion characteristic of romanticism's excesses. These feelings first took hold among Jewish elites during the Berlin Haskalah, or

Jewish Enlightenment, which, while not a romantic movement *tout court*, nonetheless emerged at the time of German romanticism's first incarnation, which lasted from approximately 1760 to 1830.<sup>26</sup> The Berlin Haskalah was characterized by a blending of Enlightenment and certain romanticist sensibilities and tendencies, and it was with what has been called "Sephardism" that both inclinations are brought into starkest relief.<sup>27</sup>

In the realms of religious and social life the program of the Haskalah sought, like the Enlightenment, to cultivate taste, beauty, and the senses with a view to the promotion of virtue, goodness, refinement, respectability, and reason. As we will see, the maskilim and those like-minded thinkers who followed in their wake repeatedly ascribed these qualities to the Sephardim, almost as if they were congenital. For example, a striking characteristic of the Berlin Haskalah was its cult of reason. Order, tempered emotions, and logic were repeatedly invoked to praise Spanish Jewry, indict Polish-Jewish culture, and serve as aspirational goals for German Jewry. In this respect, the Sephardim served as a Jewish analogue to the way figures of the German Enlightenment viewed the Greeks, whom they glorified as the epitome of reason, controlled passions, and beauty.<sup>28</sup> Beyond this, the way maskilim depicted the Sephardim allowed Iberian Jewry to be presented as ideal intermediaries, Jews who were capable of breaking down the age-old Hellenic-Hebraic divide. The other romantic feature of the Haskalah that played a leading role in the formation of modern German-Jewish culture was its profound and unprecedented attraction to Jewish history. The cult of the Sephardic Jews was made possible only thanks to the Haskalah's appreciation of the Jewish past and the development of a sentimental, pathos-filled attachment to Jewish suffering, a trope that repeatedly manifested itself into the early twentieth with German-Jewish culture's highly confected representations of Spanish Jewry.

There was one further component that set in motion the new Jewish sensibilities to be explicated in this study, and it is directly linked to the changing intellectual and political culture of the late 1790s. The generation of romantics in Germany, which included the poets Novalis and Hölderlin, the theologian Schleiermacher, the philosopher Schelling, and the Schlegel brothers, both poets and philosophers, had become disillusioned with the French Revolution, of which they had been staunch supporters. However, the unending violence and instability provoked a change of attitude, and the romantics began to assert the "need for some form of elite rule, for a more educated class to direct and control the interests and energies of the people."<sup>29</sup> According to the romantics, the problems in France were brought about by the fact that there had been no prerevolutionary preparation of hearts and minds that would make it possible for the people to cope with the radically new social and political conditions of postregicide France. Germany could not be allowed to go the way of its chaotic neighbor, and

the romantics believed that the way to introduce social change—to which they were still committed—while maintaining stability in Germany was through education, the goal of which was to inculcate virtue, self-control, refinement, and a sense that actions undertaken for the greater good should trump individual desire. The educational program to promote these qualities was called *Bildung*, a term denoting the all-encompassing cultivation of the self through the acquisition of education, critical reason, good taste, and an appreciation of beauty.<sup>30</sup> For the poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), who, Gershom Scholem remarked, had an “incalculable” impact on “the formation of Jewish attitudes towards Germany,” “Beauty alone confers happiness on all, and under its influence every being forgets that he is limited.”<sup>31</sup> With Schiller as their guide, the march of German Jews into modernity would be, among other things, a quest for beauty.

The changing attitudes of the romantics and their prescription to avoid political and social calamity in Germany were coterminous with the Haskalah and came to inform it. As the distinguished historian George Mosse observed, “*Bildung* and Enlightenment joined hands during the period of Jewish emancipation; they were meant to complement each other.”<sup>32</sup> *Bildung*, like any ennobling imperative, is by definition a transcendent force, capable of creating potential unity and productive tranquillity among diverse peoples. If Herder believed that the acquisition of *Bildung* could contribute to the elimination of differences between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, German Jews believed deeply that it could surely erase any nonreligious barriers that separated them from Germans. Proceeding from the assumption that Jews were deficient in terms of virtue and refinement, the maskilim were that self-appointed vanguard that would bring *Bildung* to the people. In their writings they repeatedly referred to *sblemut*, the Hebrew word for “perfection” or *Vollkommenheit*, its German equivalent. The attainment of an impossible-to-achieve perfection, or at least the adoption of it as a noble and ongoing exercise, was the intended goal. If, as they diagnosed, the Jews were suffering from an acute case of imperfection, the maskilim saw in romanticism’s ideals combined with Haskalah and *Bildung* a curative elixir.

Just as the dating of Jewish history does not easily map onto the dating schema for general European history, so too Jewish romanticism is not exactly coterminous with the European variant nor does it share all of its features, even its most important ones. The aesthetic preference we will examine in this study lingered on long after the romantic era had ended. The preference persisted, first, because the era of Jewish romanticism exceeds the chronology of the European romantic movement by some decades, and, second, because the protracted struggle for Jewish emancipation in Germany, which officially ended in 1871, abuts the emergence of the anti-semitic movement, which in turn gave rise to a more robust expression of

Jewish self-assertion.<sup>33</sup> (In Eastern Europe that self-assertion manifested itself in Jewish nationalism.) At this political and cultural moment we will see that the adoration of the Sephardic Jews, initially a trope of German-Jewish self-realization, becomes one of self-defense, and, finally, an important article of faith for Zionism's founding Ashkenazic fathers, mostly, though not all, from Eastern Europe.

No one better exemplifies the romantic tendency to venerate the Sephardim in the service of all three goals than Theodor Herzl. With his vivid imagination and highly developed theatrical sense, this Budapest-born resident of Vienna constructed for himself an imaginary lineage, wherein he claimed to be the descendant of Sephardic Jews. He told several versions of the story. In one, he confided to the English Zionist Jacob de Haas that his paternal great-grandfather, a rabbi named Loebl, had been forcibly converted to Catholicism. After fleeing the Iberian Peninsula, Loebl emerged in Constantinople, whereupon he returned openly to Judaism. Just prior to his death in 1904, Herzl told the Hebrew author Reuven Brainin that he was descended from one of two Jewish brothers, both of whom had risen high in the ranks of the Catholic clergy. When sent on an important mission outside the country, they decided to make their departure a permanent one and embraced the faith of their ancestors. For his own sense of self and his own self-image Herzl concocted this fantasy wherein Loebl was no longer the Slovenian Jew of reality but the Spanish Jew of Herzl's desires. Not only was this move a singular act of artifice; it must also be seen in relation to Herzl's extremely negative and frequently disgraceful descriptions of Eastern European Jews. That is to say, Jews not unlike the ones from whom he was descended.<sup>34</sup> Having absorbed the dominant stereotypes about Jews circulating in the Vienna of his day, Herzl saw in his make-believe past a way to escape the taunts and jibes that he could pretend were reserved for the *Ostjuden*.

With his regal bearing, his piercing black eyes, olive skin, and thick beard, Herzl had the look of a leader, a Jewish leader. Years later, David Ben-Gurion, first prime minister of the State of Israel, recalled his reaction to Herzl's appearance: "One glimpse of him and I was ready to follow him there and then to the land of my ancestors."<sup>35</sup> It was an image Herzl did much to cultivate. Herzl was portrayed, whether by friend, foe, or himself, as a Jew with exotic origins and flamboyant designs: as a biblical figure; or as a latter-day Shlomo Molcho—the sixteenth-century Portuguese mystic of Marrano parentage who declared himself the Messiah—or Shabbtai Zvi, the seventeenth-century false messiah from Izmir, both of whom were Sephardic Jews. Herzl longed to be anything but an ordinary Ashkenazic Jew from Central Europe.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of its specific features, the German-Jewish romanticism of which we speak here differed from the larger European movement of the same name,

especially in terms of the latter's impact on European nationalism. Where, for example, European nationalists of the later nineteenth century looked to the distant past and linked themselves to their ancient forebears, the myth of Sephardic supremacy was an Ashkenazic invention and it was one that highlighted distance and difference from the object of their paeans and not linkage to this mythical culture. In fact, what we might call the Sephardicist turn was built upon what was at times brutal Ashkenazic self-rejection. Its fundamental claim was that because they had lived in backward, medieval, Christian Europe, with its endless cycle of torment, debasement, and persecution, Ashkenazic Jews had been physically and psychologically scarred. Indeed, it was claimed that they even bore the aesthetics and physicality of a people cowed by history. The Sephardic Jews, who were said to have lived freely, thriving in Muslim Spain, gave birth to a superior culture and, in contrast to the Ashkenazim, evinced the proud carriage of a people that flowered in this propitious medieval environment.

Among Jews, romanticism, which emphasized instinct and emotion, was never permitted to supersede the Enlightenment values German Jewry so deeply cherished. Instead, Jews combined certain aspects of romanticism with an unshakable commitment to the culture of the Enlightenment, praising the Sephardim as an exemplary Jewish community. With its rationalist philosophers, secular Hebrew poets, prominent courtiers, and distinguished rabbis, medieval Iberian Jewry provided an ideal social and cultural template for a German Jewry that was becoming increasingly cognizant of its own ascent out of the ghetto. However, beset with doubts and anxieties occasioned by the antisemitic backlash that came about in the wake of Jewish embourgeoisement and success, many German Jews internalized claims about Jewish difference, cultural inferiority, and even bodily deformity.

In the political realm the Sephardism of German-Jewry was employed in the service of a liberal, cultural, and social politics. Unlike Christian romanticism, Jewish romantic sensibilities in Germany were used to bolster not Jewish nationalism but, in fact, its very opposite. Sephardism was intended to promote an ideology of Jewish acculturation, accommodation, and compatibility with the majority.

A study such as this naturally leads us into an engagement with the subject of orientalism, another theme that runs through this book. The term was popularized by Edward Said in his influential study *Orientalism* (1978). Taking his cue from Foucault, Said claimed that orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>37</sup> But he is able to formulate such a sweeping indictment only by employing a limited definition of orientalism and by ignoring entire episodes within the intellectual history of the modern East-West encounter that do not conveniently conform to Said's orientalist-as-imperialist thesis.

One episode is that of German orientalism. For Said, the determining motive behind the orientalist enterprise was imperialism, hence his focus on Britain and France, the two principal colonial powers in the Middle East. Because it lacked significant colonial holdings, Said excluded Germany from his purview.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Germany came to lead the field of orientalist scholarship, proof that orientalism and imperialism as understood by Said simply did not need each other. Rather, as Suzanne Marchand, the leading historian of German orientalism, has conclusively demonstrated, that country created a field of Oriental studies that was largely motivated by the search for Christian religious origins and not the desire for imperial domination.<sup>39</sup> Germany also developed a rich orientalist literary canon that can be read as a challenge to any singular, monolithic definition of orientalism. Indeed, scholars of orientalism, especially if their focus is Germany, prefer to speak of “orientalisms.”<sup>40</sup> One aim of this study is to expand our conception of orientalism, to indicate that just as it may have been, in some instances, an intellectual adjunct to imperialism, it was not always that and, for most genuine orientalists, especially German ones, never that. Many orientalists pursued their work long before the era of imperialism properly began, or if they worked during its heyday, they were often among the most dogged opponents of imperialist adventurism.

This brings us to the second episode in the history of orientalism that was left out of Said’s intervention and that of subsequent scholarship on the history of orientalism, namely, its Jewish dimension. It is the argument of the present study that the German-Jewish Sephardicists, whether communal leaders, anthropologists, novelists, scholars of Islam or of the history of Jews in Muslim lands, serve as significant counterexamples to the typical orientalist imagined by Said. For Central European Jewish scholars, in particular, orientalism did not function as an intellectual justification for a political system of domination. Rather, it was often celebratory and inspirational, for Jewish orientalism more often than not entailed a valorization of the Muslim Other. This was because, for German-Jewish orientalists, like their Christian counterparts, orientalism was often tantamount to a search for religious roots, for authenticity, and for Oriental role models.

Among Jewish orientalists, this undertaking, rather than a straightforward means of asserting colonial, corporeal, and cultural authority, could be, as this book will demonstrate, a profound expression of one’s own cultural anxiety and insecurity, one that could provoke deep-seated fears of inferiority and, ironically, Jewish chauvinism at the same time. Not only did the German-Jewish orientalists come from a country without a significant empire, but as Jews, they were entirely marginal to the official political and academic structure. They were not, in other words, agents of the state, and their scholarship did not serve its ends. In fact, their professional marginality as well

as the overall social marginality of German Jewry served as an impetus for their approach to Islam and to the Jews who hailed from that environment. The example of the German-Jewish orientalists we will encounter, especially in chapter 5, and the Sephardic triumphalists who appear throughout this study demonstrates that knowledge does not always equal power, especially state power.

I will argue that the Ashkenazic orientalists who promoted the cult of the Sephardic Jews did not look at the Muslim world and its subjects as ripe for imperial domination, but, rather, as a place from which contemporary Europe could learn lessons about tolerance and acceptance. According to the Ashkenazic Sephardicists, it was on the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule that the Jews of Spain flourished as they had nowhere else in the history of European Jewish settlement. It is for this reason that nineteenth-century German-Jewish historians were among the most energetic promoters of an image of Muslim Spain's *convivencia*, that harmonious and productive interaction among Muslims, Christians, and Jews.<sup>41</sup> The image that these scholars painted was of an open political and cultural environment that made for Jews who were proud, dignified, respectable, and, indeed, physically beautiful.

There is no denying that the Sephardim proved alluring to German Jews, that they were possessed of a certain "mystique," and there is a well-established albeit brief historiographical paper trail that attests to this phenomenon. One of the first to identify this was the historian of medieval German Jewry Ivan Marcus. In a 1985 essay entitled "Beyond the Sephardic Mystique," Marcus noted the role played by nineteenth-century German-Jewish historians in touting the supposed superiority of Spanish Jewry. Moreover, he also incisively pointed to the unfortunate persistence in scholarship of mythologizing medieval Sephardic history. After Marcus, the distinguished historian of German Jewry Ismar Schorsch penned "The Myth of Sephardic Superiority" (1989). In this concise yet rich article, Schorsch noted that "with the advent of emancipation in Central Europe . . . German Jews came to cultivate a lively bias for the religious legacy of Sephardic Jewry forged centuries before on the Iberian Peninsula." Both before and after Schorsch, other scholars have examined one or another of the categories that he touched upon in that important essay. In 1981, the German architectural historian Harold Hammer-Schenk's monumental two volumes on the history of synagogues in Germany contained a relatively brief but valuable section on the neo-Moorish synagogues that began to appear in the nineteenth century. His work was followed in 1984 by the more detailed study of Islamic style elements in German synagogue architecture by Hannelore Künzl. More recently, literature scholars Florian Krobb, Jonathan Hess, and Jonathan Skolnik have focused their attention



on nineteenth-century Sephardic-themed German-Jewish fiction. However, with the exception of Carsten Schapkow's German-language volume on the place of the Sephardim in modern German-Jewish culture, most studies of this general subject have been brief and schematic or the work of one scholarly specialist or another. Despite the undeniable value of such works, this is a story best told comprehensively and against the larger backdrop of modern German history as well as modern Jewish history, as it unfolded in both Central and Eastern Europe. However, there is more involved than just this. In what follows I seek to demonstrate that German Jewry did not so much "cultivate a lively bias for the religious legacy of Sephardic Jewry," as Schorsch claimed, as it cultivated a lively bias for the aesthetic and thus secular legacy of Sephardic Jewry. What most attracted the attention of German Jewry was its own invention of Sephardic beauty, which it imaginatively constructed as a reflection of Jewish history, "as it actually happened," to paraphrase the great German historian Leopold von Ranke.<sup>42</sup>

To provide the broadest perspective on the Sephardicist dimension of German-Jewish culture, this study will consider a variety of orientalist cultural productions, among them the work of Enlightenment-era Jewish intellectuals and nineteenth-century anthropologists, ethnographers, synagogue architects, novelists, and historians. Chapter 1 addresses one of the most obvious and, for German Jews in particular, vexing makers of Jewish identity, namely, language. Beginning in the eighteenth century among a small elite and then expanding into the nineteenth century among all classes of German Jews, an obsessive concern with and indeed fear of Yiddish became a central element of what it meant to be a German Jew. This is not the principal subject matter of this chapter but it was a constant presence when it came to the Jewish Enlightenment's attitude toward Hebrew. The Haskalah venerated that language, and we see in Berlin in the 1780s the first important steps toward turning Hebrew into a secular language. That process begat a discussion about the correct way to pronounce Hebrew. This chapter examines this discourse, one wherein advocacy for the Sephardic over the Ashkenazic mode of pronunciation—the latter was perceived as too reminiscent of the sound of Yiddish—was one of the earliest expressions of the Sephardicist turn among German Jews.

Language, it was believed, reflected inner moral health and outward physical appearance. Chapter 2 takes up this theme as we examine moral, behavioral, and physical descriptions of Sephardim and Ashkenazim as depicted by maskilim, as well as anthropologists and ethnographers. Taken together, these various discourses lent themselves to the widespread representation of Sephardim as the most physically beautiful Jews; moreover, such depictions were frequently juxtaposed with negative descriptions of Ashkenazim, especially those from Eastern Europe. While they sometimes

borrow heavily from the then-current tropes of racial antisemitism, they depart from the biological determinism inherent in that discourse and suggest instead that even the least attractive of Ashkenazic Jews can, with the right education and speaking the right language, shed their loathsome characteristics and become beautiful like the Sephardic Jews of the Middle Ages and the German Jews of late. Beauty and language are linked in another way. The Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew was considered authentic by many commentators because they claimed, or at least assumed, that the way Iberian Jews pronounced it was closer to its original form than the Ashkenazic accent. A similar argument was made about physical appearance. In this chapter we will see how archaeological evidence depicting ancient Israelites was used to make the claim that there was a physical line of descent from ancient Judea to the medieval *Juderia*.

Chapter 3 continues with the theme of Jewish beauty but moves the discussion from bodies to buildings. From the 1830s to the 1860s, the growth of German cities, the expanding Jewish population, and a loosening of restrictions on the appearance and location of Jewish buildings led to the construction of many new synagogues. Among Germans, urban expansion occasioned a long, complex, and at times bitter debate about the ideal style of German architecture. Jews were implicated in this debate because of their own building boom, and with it we see the appearance of various Oriental architectural styles employed in these new synagogues. This chapter traces the evolution of these various designs, which at first appeared modest and subtle but finally came to full-blown maturity and splendor with the appearance of grand, neo-Moorish synagogues. While such buildings would later come to appear across the world, it is in Germany that they originated, and at a particular moment in architectural history unique to that time and place. These houses of worship were built in an entirely fictitious Sephardic style and were almost always designed by Gentile architects. In the design phase, the plans and rationale for the way these buildings would look were tied to questions of Jewish origins in the Land of Israel, their history in the Diaspora, and the nature of German-Jewish identity.

The final two chapters of the book take up the subject of history writing in two distinct but deeply intertwined genres—the historical novel and historical scholarship. For German Jews these were two new literary forms that emerged almost simultaneously in the nineteenth century, their link personified, for example, by an author like the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), who not only wrote important novellas and poetry centered on Sephardim and Marranos but also was a member of the founding circle of young university students that in 1819 established the Association for Jewish Culture and Scholarship, the first learned society dedicated to researching and writing Jewish history.

In chapter 4 we enter squarely into the realm of German-Jewish popular culture as we see how *belles lettres* contributed mightily to the dissemination of a set of images of Sephardic Jews that became a fixed part of the German-Jewish imagination. For the most part, the Jewish public's view of the Sephardim was shaped by the scores of novels, poems, and short stories that were frequently published in serialized form in Jewish newspapers. Fast-paced adventure stories with vulnerable Jewish damsels who reject the advances of Christian suitors, Marranos who hold true to their faith despite the threat posed by terrifying inquisitors, and Sephardim who resurrect their successful lives in the lands of their dispersion after 1492 are the protagonists of these extremely popular and influential tales.

However, such stories were not mere exercises in romanticization—though that certainly happened—for the depictions of Sephardim were tailored to suit divergent German-Jewish sensibilities. So, for example, where Reform Jews tended to see Marranos as courageous adherents of the faith, Orthodox authors tended to be less forgiving, seeing them as weak and all too easily seduced into remaining in Spain even if it meant apostasy. These differing interpretations notwithstanding, such stories, whether written by Reform or Orthodox authors, agreed on one thing, namely, it was the Catholic Reconquista that had brought devastation upon what had been an ideal community, composed of beautiful, refined, successful Jews, products of their preexpulsion Muslim environment.

Chapter 5 focuses on the representations of Islam and the Spanish-Jewish past as constructed by Jewish historians. Beginning in the 1830s historians started to “package” the notion of a Jewish “Golden Age,” a concept that has enjoyed remarkable staying power, a result of the idea's being promoted simultaneously in popular and academic culture, the one symbiotically reinforcing the other. Here too we will see history written under the influence of the personal religious sensibilities and cultural biases of the historians themselves. Their frequent juxtapositions of Sephardic and Eastern European Jewry, always involving the denigration of the latter, exemplify yet again the powerful hold of Sephardic Jewry over German Jews and the utilitarian uses to which the Iberian-Jewish past could be put. Likewise, the historians' repeated emphasis on the tolerance extended to Jews in the Islamic world was a foil for their hostile feelings about Christianity and the contemporary antisemitic movement. In other words, the orientalism of these pro-Islamic and pro-Sephardic Ashkenazic Jews formed the basis of a profound critique of the European state.

In the end, I hope to demonstrate how all the German-Jewish Sephardicists we will encounter in this study were engaged in a complex process of orientalist and neo-romantic self-fashioning, wherein they sought to change the aesthetics of German Jewry by lionizing those of the Sephardim

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while simultaneously distancing themselves from the majority of their fellow Ashkenazim—the Jews of Poland. The goal of this aesthetic makeover was the promotion not of assimilation but, rather, of acculturation, and the creation of a new form of German-Jewish identity, ironically enough, inspired by a Sephardic model.