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Introduction

ALMOST AS old as the history of the Jewish people as a whole is the history of their dispersal. This commences with the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE, famously lamented in Psalm 137: By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. *Ashkenaz*, the subject of this book, is just another stage in this process of dispersal, yet one that has shaped the history of Europe to the present day. The starting point, and abiding theme, of this book is the insight that the whole of Jewish history from its beginnings to modern times is characterized by the Janus-like face of motherland and diaspora, that there has never been a motherland without a diaspora, and that the two are closely interlinked. The narrative of a Judean homeland as the unique and eternal nucleus and center of the Jewish people and of the diaspora as the result of a series of expulsions that began with the Babylonian Exile is a fiction that Zionism has attempted—and still continues to attempt—to elevate to the status of an official doctrine of the state of Israel.¹ Motherland and diaspora were, and have always been, two sides of the same coin, with neither side capable of ridding itself of the other without, in the process, sacrificing essential aspects of Jewishness.

Jews who from the Middle Ages made their home in Western and Central Europe, and thereafter in Eastern Europe too, do not call the region where they settled “Germany” but instead use the Hebrew word *Ashkenaz*, which is already documented in the Bible. Jews living in this settlement area are known as *Ashkenazim* or *Ashkenazi* Jews. The complementary term is *Sepharad* (and its derivatives *Sephardim* or *Sephardic*

Jews), which relates to the Jews of Spain or southern France. The Ashkenazim and the Sephardim inhabited two very different societies under Christian and Islamic suzerainty, respectively, with different languages (Yiddish and Judaeo-Spanish/Ladino) and different religious and cultural characteristics. As a result, their histories took very divergent paths. Whereas Ashkenazi Jews in Central and later Eastern Europe were exposed to a long succession of alternately relatively good times, spells of oppression and expulsion and return, followed by further rounds of persecution and expulsion—culminating in state-organized mass murder in the death camps of the National Socialist regime—Sephardic Jews, after many centuries of flourishing, experienced the trauma of a one-off, comprehensive mass expulsion from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1496) by the Christian rulers of those countries. This book is exclusively concerned with the history of the Jews in Ashkenaz. Its focus is on the Middle Ages, whereas far briefer sketches are given of the previous history in Antiquity and the history of the Ashkenazim in the modern period, including occasional glimpses of current events. Features of Sephardic Judaism are only occasionally cited for the purposes of comparison.

In 2021–22 the government of the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Jewish community, and a host of local initiatives celebrated “1700 Years of Jewish Life in Germany” (to quote the title of the official announcement). The specific occasion for this commemorative year was the edict issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great to the council of the city of Cologne in 321, granting it the right to appoint Jews to the city council. Quite apart from the excessively generously calculated timespan—it would be many years after 321 before one could talk in terms of a “Germany”—it is tempting to ask how one might comply with the perfectly reasonable injunction to “recall the long and rich tradition of Jewish culture in Germany” without lapsing into all-too-familiar clichés.² Our shared history was anything but joyous, and the frequently invoked mutual respect between Jews and Germans was, as Gershom Scholem emphatically determined after the Shoah, precisely not mutual but actually very one-sided, given the overwhelmingly one-way flow of cultural influence, namely, from the Germans to the Jews.

The checkered history of the Ashkenazi Jews begins in the Middle Ages, and we know very little about when and how these Jews came to Western and Central Europe. In the first part of the book, therefore, under the title “Origins,” I will give a very broad-brush outline of the prehistory of Ashkenazi Judaism in Late Antiquity, because this era was already characterized by a long tradition before it entered the period of documented history. In Antiquity, not just in the diaspora but also in the motherland beginning with the campaigns of conquest by Alexander the Great, Judaism became subject to a thoroughgoing process of Hellenization that embraced and enduringly shaped all aspects of daily life—including the realm that we call “religion.” For the diaspora, this went uncontested for the most part, whereas in the case of the motherland it faced a long uphill struggle. I begin by providing a summary of the political and cultural developments in the motherland from the successors of Alexander (the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans) to the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the Temple, before going on to describe the conditions in the ancient Jewish diaspora. Where the diaspora is concerned, I will confine myself to treating the three great centers of Asia Minor, Egypt with Alexandria, and Italy with Rome.

In assessing the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Asia Minor, an important role is played by synagogue inscriptions, which, alongside ethnic Jews, also mention Gentile “God-fearers” as representatives of a distinct group that felt attracted to Judaism without ever taking the step toward conversion (proselytism). In Alexandria, the dispute between Jews, indigenous Egyptians, and Greeks over Roman citizenship rights led to the first pogrom in Jewish history. At the same time, in the family of Philo of Alexandria we encounter an extremely acculturated family whose members resolved the tension between Judaism and Greco-Roman culture in different ways. And in Rome the allure of Judaism was so undimmed, especially among the uppermost strata of society, that Latin satirists felt it necessary to make the increasing number of God-fearers and proselytes the principal target of their mockery. The material legacy of Jews in Rome—epitaphs in the Catacombs, inscriptions on sarcophagi and wall decorations in the Catacombs, images and inscriptions on gold glasses, and countless oil

lamps—testifies to the existence in Italy of a cultural space common to Jews and Gentiles alike that was characterized by shared symbols independent of their particular ethnic or religious provenance.

Of special importance for the realignment of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple was so-called rabbinic Judaism, which came into being under the leadership of rabbis in the wake of the two Roman–Jewish Wars. Here, geographically speaking, we are in both the Jewish–Palestinian motherland and the Babylonian diaspora, for the rabbis inhabited both the Roman province of Judaea/Palestine and Babylon, the former place of “exile,” and constantly shuttled back and forth between these locations. Beginning in Palestine and then subsequently in Babylon, the rabbis developed and perfected their system of Torah-centricity, in which, in place of sacrifice in the Temple, they placed at the center of Jewish life the Torah and its binding exegesis authorized by them.

However, as more recent research is making increasingly clear, this “rabbinzation” of Judaism was less successful and lasted far longer than previously thought. This is demonstrated not least by the archeological finds from the third or fourth century CE at the Jewish necropolis at Bet Shearim in Galilee. Here, alongside Jewish symbols, many motifs from Greek mythology have been discovered on the walls of underground tombs and on the sarcophagi. The same is true of the mosaics in Galilean synagogues dating from the first few centuries CE, at the center of which the Greek–Roman sun god Helios/Sol is often shown, surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac and by symbols that derive from the Jewish Temple Cult (*see plate 1*). In the fourth and fifth centuries, the rabbis managed to noticeably shape Judaism according to their own conceptions through their literature (the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash), and by the sixth century the process of rabbinzation of Palestinian Judaism was largely complete. Among other things, this can be deduced from the fact that figurative depictions in synagogue mosaics were supplanted by rabbinic texts; in other words, they underwent literarization. The same period, also in Palestine, saw the development of liturgical poetry (Hebrew: *piyyut*), which succinctly summarized in elaborately and highly poetic verses the exegesis that was taught

in Talmudic schools (*yeshivot*) and was recited during synagogue services.

The Babylonian Jews are the descendants of those Jews who did not return to Judea/Yehud at the end of the Babylonian Exile. In the first centuries CE they lived under the dominion of the Parthians and Sassanids, in incomparably more favorable political and cultural conditions than their coreligionists living under Roman and then Byzantine control in Palestine. They evolved into the largest diaspora community in Antiquity. At the same time their rabbinic leaders were so closely tied to their colleagues in Palestine that diaspora and motherland can barely be distinguished from one another. Numerous Talmudic academies were founded by Babylonian scholars, which were in close contact with the Palestinian *yeshivot*. The head of the Babylonian Jews was the exilarch (Aramaic: *resh galuta*), who was recognized by the Sassanid state: that official was the counterpart of the patriarch in Palestine. Over the course of time, Babylonian scholars became so influential that they entered into open competition with their Palestinian colleagues and ultimately established their preeminence.

A sign of this dominance is the fact that the Babylonian Talmud (*talmud bavli*) asserted itself over the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud (*talmud yerushalmi*) and remains the normative Talmud to the present day. The heyday of the Babylonian academies lasted until the tenth century, and the office of exilarch only came to an end in the eleventh century (i.e., much later than the position of patriarch in Palestine, which was dissolved as early as the first half of the fifth century). The center of gravity of both Babylonian and Palestinian Judaism now shifted to the west and the north by two distinct routes: one running via North Africa to Spain, and the other via southern Italy to the heartland of Western and Central Europe.

Part II, “Dispersal,” begins with a definition of the term “Ashkenaz.” Documented in the Hebrew Bible in a variety of different meanings, over time the concept narrowed to denote a region of Western and Central Europe north of the Alps, which initially was not defined more specifically; the term can be used in a geographical, cultural, or political sense. Competing geographical–political terms include “Lotir” for the

short-lived region of Lotharingia, “Zarfat” for the heartland of the French kingdom north of the Loire, and “Provence” (Hebrew: *Provenza*) in the far south bordering the Mediterranean. Within this group, Ashkenaz signified the Kingdom of the East Franks, from which developed the Holy Roman Empire (later given the suffix “of the German Nation”). From the eleventh century on, a distinction was drawn between the “language of Ashkenaz” (*leshon ashkenaz*), denoting either German or Yiddish, and the “foreign tongue” (*la’az*), meaning Old French. Thus, the northern French Jews spoke Old French and belonged politically to the Kingdom of the West Franks or France, whereas their German-speaking coreligionists belonged to the East Franconian Kingdom or the Regnum Teutonicum or the Holy Roman Empire and spoke Yiddish. However, in their cultural characteristics and their religious orientation, both groups together formed the common region known as Ashkenaz, with its center in northern France and the Rhineland.

We know little about the route by which Jews spread as far as Western and Northern Europe. In all likelihood, this happened in the course of the military conquests of the Roman Empire along a road network that was expanded to facilitate those campaigns. The earliest tangible focal point is Cologne, which in 50 CE was raised to the status of a Roman colony and where, with the famous edict of Emperor Constantine, a Jewish community is documented as early as 321 CE. Almost no other Roman edict or Jewish community of Late Antiquity has received so much attention or been as carefully studied as this edict of Constantine, with its reference to the Jews of Cologne. The reason for this is a historical dilemma that has remained unresolved to the present day: On the one hand, the edict presupposes a thriving Jewish community that may have come into existence as early as the aftermath of the Second Jewish War and that must have experienced a long period of consolidation (though we do not know any details of this). But on the other hand, this Jewish community abruptly disappears from the historical record, just as suddenly as it arrived.

Between 321 and the first indications of a Jewish community in Cologne in the eleventh century there is a gap of some seven hundred years of obscurity, with no evidence of the presence of Jews in Cologne. And

this applies not only to Cologne but also to the whole of the region covered by modern Germany: An analysis of all archaeological finds that might indicate a possible long-term Jewish presence—and that are often announced to great public interest—shows them instead to be largely insignificant: No evidence has thus far come to light of a long-term, flourishing Jewish community anywhere in present-day Germany before the High Middle Ages. Of course, this does not mean that one definitively did not exist, but historically unequivocal finds remain elusive. As things stand, therefore, the supposed 1,700 years of a Jewish presence in Germany is too high an estimate by around 700 years.

The state of play in present-day France is a different matter. Extensive literary testimony concerning the Jews of Lyons in southeastern France, at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône Rivers, provides a snapshot of a thriving Jewish community in the Carolingian Empire. In the first half of the ninth century, the Jews of Lyons, who were evidently experienced and successful long-distance traders, enjoyed the patronage of their ruler, Louis the Pious. With the active support of Louis against the restrictive policies of Bishop of Lyons Agobard, they lived a self-confident Jewish life that does not fit into any of the clichés that are normally associated with the history of the Jews in the medieval period. Although in a narrow sense Lyons lies outside the area of northern France and the Rhineland described by the term “Ashkenaz,” indications from Lyons do nonetheless enable us, for example, to divine and, however tentatively, begin to document the route that Jews took from the Roman Empire to Ashkenaz.

In the following parts of the book, I first address the question of the foundation myths that have grown up around the origin and development of Ashkenazi Judaism: namely, the Kalonymus family tree handed down by Eleazar of Worms and the “Chronicle of Ahimaaz.” This chronicle, which was written in around 1054 in Puglia, recounts the experiences of a certain Abu Aaron, who was expelled by his father from Babylon to southern Italy. Together, both sources present the elite of Ashkenazi Judaism, who allegedly all belonged to the Kalonymus family, as descendants of rabbinized Palestinian Jews who, by way of southern Italy, emigrated to Western Europe (with its heartland in the

Rhineland) yet who nevertheless submitted to the Babylonian rabbinic norm imposed by the Babylonian Talmud.

There follows a brief overview of the legal status of Jews in the Middle Ages relating to the emperor or king, secular and ecclesiastical princes, and imperial cities. I then consider the economic conditions governing their lives—local commerce and, above all, long-distance trade, then their gradual restriction to moneylending, and preclusion from earning a living as craftspeople—and the autonomous structure of Jewish communities, including self-governance and a variety of public offices. The position of rabbis and the *yeshivot*, the emergence of the rabbinate, ordinances concerning relations with the wider Christian community, and the first steps toward supraregional mergers of communities are also discussed in this context. The aim of this general overview is to help readers orient themselves in the discussion of details and local peculiarities that concludes this part.

In part III, in a series of extensive chapters on individual cities, I describe in greater detail Jewish communities in selected conurbations of the Holy Roman Empire. With the exception of Frankfurt, these are cities that were already settled by Jews before the First Crusade of 1096. I begin with the Rhineland cities of Cologne, Mainz, Speyer, and Worms, which were of outstanding political, cultural, and economic importance in the power structure of the empire. The last three are the so-called ShUM cities, which since 2021 have been designated as UNESCO world cultural heritage sites. ShUM is an acronym of the initial letters of the Hebrew names of the cities: *schpira* (Speyer), *war-maisa* (Worms),³ and *magenza* (Mainz). Regensburg, which lies farther to the south and east at the confluence of the Regen and the Danube Rivers, was closely connected with the ShUM cities; Prague, meanwhile, was the center of Judaism in Bohemia and contains the oldest complete preserved synagogue in the world (the *Altneuschul*); and the prosperous free imperial city of Frankfurt was the first city to segregate its Jewish inhabitants in a ghetto in the true sense.

The religious and cultural life of Ashkenazi Jews played a central role in the Middle Ages. This is treated in part IV, “Living with the Torah.” It is so titled because in the wake of rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity,

the Torah with all its exegeses and practical applications became the mainstay of the daily life of Ashkenazi Jews too. They lived with and from the Torah—in other words, every aspect of their lives revolved around the Torah as the epitome of reality. School education, which had always been assiduously fostered in Judaism, was geared toward learning the Torah. Pupils learned how to read and write through the Torah; ultimately, schoolchildren could repeat the content and the exegeses of the Torah from memory. Ashkenazi Judaism, in particular, developed and maintained its own initiation rites. These involved children of school age (exclusively boys) “acting out” the unique historical revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai, with the skills of reading, writing, and learning being practiced and rewarded. In making reward an intrinsic part of the ritual—the children were allowed to lick honey from the letters on the writing tablet and at the conclusion to eat honey cakes and an egg—this Ashkenazi practice emphasized the child-friendly aspect of education.

All Ashkenazi scholars were distinguished by the fact that the focus of their spiritual activity—just like that of their role models, the rabbis of Late Antiquity—was on the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and classical rabbinic literature. By far the most influential and renowned commentator of the High Middle Ages on both the Bible and Talmud was **Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki** (1040/41–1105), who continues to the present day to be known by the acronym **Rashi**.⁴ He was born in the wine-growing town of Troyes in the Champagne region of northeastern France, studied in the ShUM cities of Mainz and Worms, and subsequently spent his life as a wine maker and as the principal of a highly regarded yeshivah in Troyes. He is the prime example of the close interconnection between Ashkenazi scholars in Germany and northern France.

To give readers a clear picture of the characteristic features of the Ashkenazi treatment of traditional literature, I will cite examples of their exegesis of the Bible and the Talmud in English translation. This is an experiment that is premised on readers’ willingness to pay attention to details that are alien to them for the most part and that, in terms of their content, are not easy to understand. But this is the only way of

transcending the customary abstract templates and enabling readers to gain an impression of how Ashkenazi Jews thought and reasoned, what they considered important, and what they ignored. In doing so, I will confine myself to Rashi's exegeses of the Bible and the Talmud. His Bible commentary still occupies a prominent place today in all rabbinic editions of the Bible (*Biblia Rabbinica*); the first edition of 1475 was the first book to be printed in Hebrew. As an example of its strictly context-related exegesis based on Hebrew or Aramaic grammar and a precise appreciation of the etymology of individual words, as well as his sovereign command of the rabbinic and contemporary exegetical tradition, I have chosen the beginning of his exegesis of the Book of Genesis (*Bereshit*).

In addition to the Bible, Rashi also wrote commentaries on almost all tractates of the Babylonian Talmud (*bavli*), and this work was almost certainly of even greater significance than his Bible commentary. As an example of Rashi's way of working, I have selected the beginning of the Tractate Berakhot ("Benedictions"), the first tractate of the Bavli. In reading this, it must be borne in mind that the Talmud is nothing more than a commentary on the Mishnah, the first compendium of religious law produced by rabbinic Judaism, which was compiled around 200 CE. Rashi's commentary on the Talmud therefore simply amounts to a commentary on a commentary. As a result, in two stages he first comments on the Mishnah and then on the Talmud, which builds on the Mishnah—and my textual example also follows the same structure. Furthermore, we must remember that another school came into existence in northern France in the generation of Rashi's grandchildren, which saw itself as even more "modern." Taking critical issue with Rashi's exegesis, it produced "addenda" (*Tosafot*) or glosses on the Mishnah and the Talmud, which in their turn also exerted a considerable influence on Ashkenazi Judaism.

A further literary genre in which Ashkenazi scholars excelled is that of responses. This goes back to the tradition of "questions and answers" (*she'elot u-teshuvot*) practiced in rabbinic schools in Babylonia: rabbinic scholars throughout the entire Jewish world would pose contentious or problematic cases of religious law to heads of yeshivot who were widely

respected beyond their immediate region and ask them to provide definitive rulings or at least make recommendations. The themes in question cover the whole spectrum of real Jewish life in the Middle Ages, relating both to matters within the Jewish community and frequently to relations between Jews and Gentiles. After a response of Rashi's, I present several responses of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (1220–93), who is widely known and quoted under the acronym of **Maharam** (Morenu **ha-Rav** Meir, “Our teacher, Rav Meir”): He was the most influential author of responses by far in the Ashkenazi Middle Ages. After the three ShUM communities had, after several attempts, finally succeeded in coalescing into a supraregional legal institution, the collections of their court decrees from 1220 and 1223, compiled under the title of “Legal Rulings from Speyer, Worms, and Mainz” (*takkanot shu“m*), became the authoritative source of law for all Ashkenazi Jews. I will illustrate the most important decisions taken at various synods.

Alongside jurisprudence in the broadest sense, the second great field of literary activity undertaken by Ashkenazi scholars was liturgical poetry (*piyyut*). It is based on classical poetry from the sixth and seventh centuries in Palestine. The specific genre favored by Ashkenazi poets (*payytanim*) are penitential prayers (*selichot*) and elegies (*kinot*), inspired by the terrible persecutions of the Crusades, especially the First Crusade of 1096. By way of illustration, from the many preserved texts of this genre, I discuss a *kinah* by Kalonymus bar Yehuda the Younger, who experienced the massacre in Mainz as a young man. The principal themes of the elegies are these—the slaughter that the Crusaders perpetrated among the Jews in places of supposed sanctuary established by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities, the utter state of despair in which those Jews took their own lives and those of their children in a ritual modeled on temple sacrifices to “sanctify God’s name” (Hebrew: *kiddush ha-shem*) and to avoid forcible baptism; the accusation that they direct at God as the instigator responsible for this calamity; and, not least, the fantasies of revenge in which they indulge in expectation of ultimate redemption—all in all a mixture of motifs that in their drastic bloodthirstiness make for scarcely bearable reading even for the modern reader.

A quite different branch of literary production among Ashkenazi Jews is represented by the “Ashkenazi Pietists” (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), in which the “pious” (*Hasidim*) speak out as the self-proclaimed elite of the Jewish people. These writings are the product of the heads of the Kalonymus family in the century between around 1150 and 1250, in the form of the triad of the father (Samuel ben Kalonymus), the son (Yehuda ben Samuel he-Hasid), and their disciple (Eleazar of Worms). This dynasty, as the third pillar of Ashkenazi Judaism alongside legal systems and liturgical poetry, promulgated a radical and ethical pietism in conjunction with an esoteric doctrine concerning the nature of God. In their jointly authored “Book of the Pious” (*Sefer Hasidim*) they attempted to prescribe pietism to their fellow humans as the binding norm, albeit with little success. The esoteric teaching was originally conceived as an occult doctrine but subsequently was more widely disseminated; in its harking back to the Hekhalot literature of Late Antiquity, it is regarded as the Ashkenazi counterpart of the pronounced mysticism (Kabbalah) of Sephardic Judaism. I begin by citing numerous examples to establish the *Book of the Pious* as the most important source of Ashkenazi Judaism in the Middle Ages regarding both internal Jewish affairs and coexistence with the Christian community. And in presenting the Ashkenazi Pietists’ teachings about God, I rely on the “Rulings of the Glory of God” (*Hilkhot ha-Kavod*) by Eleazar of Worms. The basis of both texts was an exhaustive and meticulous exegesis of the text of the Bible according to specific rules, among which the transposition (permutation) of letters and the numerical value of letters play a special role.

A visible sign of the highly select position of the Ashkenazi Pietists is the legend of the golem, the artificial human created by a rabbi. This legend can be traced back to Talmudic Judaism, although its real career as a popular myth (which endures to the present day) begins with the Ashkenazi Pietists. For it was they who, by virtue of their special piety, claimed to have been the first people to have successfully created an artificial human being, in imitation of the divine act of creation. At first, their golem was completely without purpose. The sole aim of the ritual that they developed, which essentially confined itself to shaping a

person from clay and the permutation of letters of the Hebrew alphabet, was to demonstrate that they were capable, in their unrivaled righteousness and piety, of creating an artificial human being. After they had succeeded in their aim, their golem ceased to be of interest to them, and they transformed him back into a lump of clay. It was only the golem created by Rabbi Juda Löw of Prague that became a focal point of a whole body of legends in which the golem's practical use came to the fore.

Part IV ends with a survey of the iconography of figurative book illumination in medieval Ashkenazi Bible manuscripts. Prior to this development, the last examples of figurative depictions of animals, plants, and, above all, people had been on synagogue mosaics from Late Antiquity. Then they disappear for around 700 years and only reemerge in Ashkenaz in the first half of the thirteenth century; in Sepharad, it took even longer before figurative depictions became possible once more, thanks to Islam's antipathy toward figurative representation. In Ashkenaz, the portrayal of human faces posed a particular problem: Initially they were indicated by blank oval shapes, or as obscured by hair, or replaced by animals' faces. The question of whether figurative images were permitted is the subject of exhaustive deliberation in legal reports. The consensus that eventually emerged was that only three-dimensional depictions were forbidden—due to the danger of idolatry—whereas two-dimensional paintings were allowed. Jewish book illumination developed in close cooperation with Christian artists' studios and is a particularly striking example of Jewish–Christian interaction during the Middle Ages.

The negative side of Jewish and Christian cohabitation in the medieval period, which became increasingly prevalent, manifested itself in the many persecutions and expulsions that took place, the subject of part V. The first dramatic turning point was the Crusades, especially the First Crusade, which from the Jewish side is vividly documented in three Hebrew chronicles. The persecutions began in Speyer in May 1096 and in the same month spread to Mainz and Worms. The fullest account of the events relates to Mainz. It recounts the bloody slaughter that the Crusaders undertook among the city's Jews, their no less bloody

suicides, the killing of their own children as a sacrificial act to “sanctify God’s name,” the mutual hatred in evidence, and the strained anticipation of salvation. This account is far more extreme than the descriptions given in the *kinot*. Although the Rhineland communities recovered relatively quickly from the effects of the First Crusade (and also from the two Crusades that took place in the twelfth century), those traumatic experiences remained firmly anchored in the collective memory of Ashkenazi Judaism—only to then be replaced and even surpassed by the Khmelnytsky massacres of 1648–49 in Poland and the pogroms in Russia at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yet it was the Christian Middle Ages that were to develop the worst antisemitic stereotypes, which proceeded to determine the relationship between Christians and Jews to the present day: Jews were accused of killing Christian children in a ritual act of murder that mimicked the crucifixion of Jesus in order to siphon off their blood (the so-called blood libel). Another accusation leveled at Jews was that they stole consecrated hosts and used all manner of instruments of torture on them to try and get them to shed blood (desecration of the host). They were also blamed for causing the Great Plague in the mid-fourteenth century by deliberately poisoning wells. Their most important scripture, the Talmud, was vilified as the work of the devil, repeatedly banned, and publicly burned in Paris in 1242. All these accusations triggered massacres of Jews, which tended to spread from what was initially a local incident to take in much larger areas. The pogroms unleashed by the Great Plague far exceeded those that had gone before and in their catastrophic effects ushered in the final demise of Ashkenazi Judaism in the West. Recurring waves of persecutions and expulsions of Jews from the free imperial cities, as well as from secular and church-administered territories in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, led to Jewish communities being almost entirely “ethnically cleansed” from large parts of the Holy Roman Empire.

The anti-Jewish Christian iconography of the Middle Ages proved an effective instrument of religious propaganda. As illustrative examples, I concentrate on the motif of the “Jewish sow” and the allegorical

figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga. Obscene images of Jews, identified by their “Jewish hats” (the *pileus cornutus*), who are shown suckling the teats of a sow, examining its anus and kissing this or its vulva, or eating or drinking its excrement and urine, are found primarily on the capitals of pillars or on the exterior walls of churches. Around forty examples have been preserved, almost all from German-speaking regions and dating from the first half of the thirteenth century on. These sculptures have been the catalyst for heated debates about how we should deal with them today, prompted particularly by the sandstone relief on the façade of the City Church in Wittenberg and in the context of a reappraisal of Martin Luther’s antisemitism.

The monumental sculptures of Ecclesia and Synagoga, as personifications of the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue, are of a totally different nature. I confine myself to discussing three examples on the external façades of the cathedrals in Reims, Strasbourg, and Bamberg, all from the first half of the thirteenth century—the same period during which the image of the Jewish sow (*Judensau*) gained widespread currency in Germany. In all three cases, both figures display an exquisite beauty. Even though Ecclesia carries the insignia of her triumph over Synagoga (her crown, chalice, spear, and a cross with a flag) and Synagoga bears the outward signs of her defeat (a blindfold, a crown that has been displaced or fallen from her head, tablets of the law that are held the wrong way round or are slipping from her grasp, and a broken spear or staff), where feminine grace is concerned, Synagoga is in no way inferior to Ecclesia. Even the vanquished Synagoga radiates dignity, which marks her out as the elder and esteemed sister of Ecclesia and endows her with respect despite her defeat. Located as it is in a prominent public position, where all visitors to the cathedrals cannot fail to see it, this subtle ecclesiastical iconography ostentatiously distances itself from the vulgar antisemitic “folk art” of the Christian Middle Ages.

In a final part, I provide a synopsis of the further history of Ashkenazi Judaism in Eastern Europe. The migratory movement toward Eastern Europe, which had started even earlier, reached its peak with the expulsion of Jews from the cities of Western and Central Europe. In the totally different environment of the Slavic peoples, who had only recently been

Christianized, Ashkenazi Judaism was able to flourish anew. A distinct Eastern European identity began to evolve, enabling us to draw a clear distinction between Western and Eastern Ashkenaz. As a result of the shift in the center of gravity to the East, the completely separate development of Western Ashkenazi Judaism in the modern period is no longer the subject of this book and is only touched on occasionally. By contrast, I will sketch the history of Eastern Ashkenazi Judaism in Poland and Lithuania up to the modern period. What was initially an unequivocally positive development came to an abrupt end with the so-called Khmelnytsky massacres in the mid-seventeenth century, a traumatic experience that became ingrained in the collective memory of Judaism as the *gezerot tach we-tat* (Disaster of 1648–49).

One focal point of this overview is on the cultural and intellectual peculiarities of Eastern Ashkenazi Judaism. So-called Eastern European Hasidism is quite distinct from the Hasidism of the Ashkenazi Pietists in the Western Ashkenazi High Middle Ages and is generally regarded as the modern apogee of Jewish mystical movements. It is based on the Lurianic Kabbalah of Safed/Tzfat in Palestine in the sixteenth century, on the Sabbatean movement in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire together with its heretical offshoots, and on Frankism, with its no less heretical tendencies in eighteenth-century Poland. The last two movements had a profound impact on Jewish self-identity, led to tensions and schisms within the communities, and were bitterly opposed by traditional Judaism, which saw itself as the guardian of orthodoxy, right up to the modern period. Hasidism, which tried to distance itself from the heretical tendencies of the Sabbateans and the Frankists, developed its own form of mysticism, with a stress on the immanence of God in the world and the mediating role of its spiritual leaders, the *Zaddikim* (Righteous Ones), though in the eyes of its opponents (the *Mitnagdim*), this belief too overstepped the boundary of heresy.

The Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries originated in Western Europe. Whereas there it frequently resulted directly in assimilation, in Eastern Europe it reached a far happier compromise with orthodoxy. As a result, it is above all the East European form of the *Haskalah* that was able to successfully

establish itself within Judaism and substantially change it. By contrast, the Jewish socialism that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century on the basis of a strong proletariat was a genuinely Eastern Ashkenazi phenomenon. It was closely associated with the Yiddish language and culture that were prevalent in that region. The same is true of Zionism, which originated in Russia, rather than Germany. And it was Zionism that made the revival of the Hebrew language (*tehiyyat ha-lashon ha-ivrit*), initially as a literary language, a cornerstone of its program of national renewal. The decisive breakthrough to an everyday language, however, only took place in Palestine and owed its success almost exclusively to the tenacity of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the father of the modern Hebrew language (“New Hebrew”), who had emigrated to Palestine in 1881. After the notorious language dispute of 1913–14 between German and Hebrew over which should be the sole language of instruction, Hebrew managed to assert itself as the national language of the Jews in Palestine at the end of World War I, and with the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 it became the country’s official language.

In Eastern Europe Yiddish was and remained the dominant everyday language, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it saw its first great blossoming as a literary language, with the triumvirate of Mendele Mokher Sefarim (Yiddish: Mendele Moicher Sforim, d. 1917), Sholem Aleichem (d. 1916), and Isaac Leib Peretz (d. 1915). In the twentieth century many Yiddish writers from Poland and Russia emigrated to the United States and established a new center of Yiddish literature there. Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902–91), who was born Icek Hersz Zynger in the village of Leoncin in Poland, emigrated to the United States in 1935 and in 1978 became the first, and so far only, Yiddish writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Because Yiddish writers often wrote simultaneously in Hebrew, they also contributed significantly to the revival of Hebrew as a literary language. Yet the decisive step in this development was made in Palestine by authors who had emigrated there from Eastern Europe. In 1966, some years before Singer, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), who originated from Galicia, became the first Hebrew writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is these modern Yiddish and Hebrew authors from Eastern Europe or who had their

roots there, whom we have to thank for preserving the memory of the Jews of Eastern Ashkenaz, after so many were murdered in the German death camps and the rest were scattered around the entire world.

This book is aimed at a wide readership. Its intention is not to present any independent new scholarship but rather to summarize previous research. References to relevant secondary literature and disagreements with its findings have been kept to a minimum. As always in my books, I set great store by discussing original sources in translation. However, I am not laboring under any misconception that I am thereby giving my readers direct access to historical reality: the selection of sources, like their interpretation, is always a personal one, which, of course, can and must be called into question. Having said that, no one has hitherto attempted to offer a comprehensive account of such conceptual breadth of Ashkenazi Judaism, with its roots in Late Antiquity, its zenith in the Middle Ages, and an overview of the shift of its center of gravity from Western to Eastern Europe. The shift of emphasis toward Eastern Ashkenazi Judaism that this entails is not some unsought though necessary byproduct of the whole process but quite intentional.

As is always the case, from the very outset my wife Barbara cast a critical eye over the writing of the manuscript. My thanks are due her for many hours of stimulating and constructive discussion not only of the concept as a whole but also of specific problems. I would not have been able to write my brief summaries in this form of modern phenomena such as the *Haskalah*, socialism, and Zionism without her expertise. My friend Jürgen Richert from Munich once more read the entire manuscript, drew my attention to several errors, and contributed some important observations. I am most grateful to Ulrich Nolte from the publisher C. H. Beck for his extraordinarily thorough editing of the manuscript. Sabine Höllmann was kind enough to create the index. And finally, special thanks are due to the Gerda Henkel Foundation, which has included the book in its Historical Library and provided generous support for its publication.

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