

Introduction: Out of the Archive

Nineteenth-century French Jews have often received bad press. Victims of some of the most virulent attacks in the history of modern antisemitism, they were pilloried in their time by foes on both the left and the right. In the 1840s, socialist firebrands denounced them as lords of a new financial feudalism.¹ In the 1880s, Édouard Drumont's best-selling *La France juive* [Jewish France] cast them as nefarious agents of revolution and as rootless invaders intent on taking over the nation.² By the time of the Dreyfus affair in the 1890s, antisemitic mobs in both metropolitan France and colonial Algeria accused them of high treason. However, more potentially damning condemnations—because less preposterous—have come from other Jews.

Certain historians of Judaism fault nineteenth-century French Jews for having made the least of the most. When I began this project, a librarian at a major American Jewish research center, to whom I had turned for help in locating some nineteenth-century periodicals, asked me why the French Jews in this period had contributed nothing to Jewish culture despite having more freedom than Jews in any other country in Europe. According to her, there were no nineteenth-century French Jewish religious thinkers worth mentioning, no biblical scholars or philosophers of Judaism, no fiction writers who described the Jewish experience before Marcel Proust—and he was baptized. How different from the German Jews!

Alongside this cultural critique, political critics have portrayed nineteenth-century French Jews as misguided apostles of assimilation.³ Writing in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, Hannah Arendt devotes a large portion of her section on antisemitism in *The Origins*

of *Totalitarianism* to the French case and specifically to the French Jews' inability to meet the challenge of the Dreyfus affair. For Arendt, nineteenth-century French Jews were parvenus who failed to see their true status as pariahs. "When the Dreyfus Affair broke out to warn them that their security was menaced, they were deep in the process of a disintegrating assimilation,"⁴ Arendt maintains, describing how French Jews at the time of the affair refused to speak out against anti-semitism for fear of jeopardizing their own social integration. According to Arendt, this explains "why so few wholehearted supporters of Dreyfus were to be found in the ranks of French Jewry."⁵

These are serious charges, for they paint a picture of a deluded community—or lack of community—that failed to act in politically responsible ways. The legacy of these nineteenth-century delusions, Arendt implies, led the French Jews into the snare of Auschwitz.⁶ Even if we avoid the error of viewing the nineteenth century through the lens of twentieth-century catastrophe, the critiques of both Arendt and the librarian raise serious questions. Were nineteenth-century French Jews really so politically and culturally deficient? Did they contribute nothing to Jewish culture? Did their embrace of French citizenship blind them to menacing realities and inhibit communal solidarity? Did their desire to become French preclude their remaining Jews? Or have our own ideologies, our own assumptions about the nature of assimilation—or about the nature of France—blinded us to the historical reality of the French Jewish experience?

I began this project on the hunch that fiction produced by these nineteenth-century French Jews—were it to exist—would help answer these questions. What kinds of stories, I wondered, did French Jews tell about their situation in the century after the Revolution of 1789, when France became the first modern country to emancipate the Jews? How did nineteenth-century French Jews imagine their place in the nation and the world? How did they conceive of their past and their future? How did they view their relation to other Jews? Increasingly, scholars have come to view fiction as a place where such existential questions are asked with particular urgency and where ideologies become manifest in particularly telling ways. Moreover, literary publication, by definition, represents a form of public expression. The mere

existence of nineteenth-century French Jewish fiction—which I define as fiction by and about Jews, published in French⁷—would thus constitute a refutation of charges that French Jews completely abandoned their communal affiliations or made their Judaism a matter of private confession only.⁸

But have we even bothered to look for such literature, let alone tried to understand what it has to say about the dynamics of Jewish emancipation and assimilation?⁹ The answer is clearly no. The reasons for this lacuna are partly ideological; until recently, literary critics in France, and to a lesser extent in the United States, have tended to avoid categorizing fiction through reference to a writer's ethnic or religious background. This is no doubt partly a reaction to the overt antisemitism of certain literary critics before World War II.¹⁰ Even if this taboo has been lifted, leading to a number of fine studies of French Jewish fiction of the twentieth century, the case of the nineteenth century remains almost totally unexplored.¹¹

Indeed, historians of French Jewish literature have denied that Jews wrote fiction in French before 1900. Armand Lunel (1892–1977), for example, maintained that until the end of the nineteenth century “there was not yet in France a literature that one could call specifically and exclusively Jewish. . . . It is in vain that one would look for a Jew who had manifested himself as such in Belles-Lettres.”¹² A recent textbook on French Jewish history echoes this view, arguing that nineteenth-century French Jews were too preoccupied with material concerns and with the struggle to integrate into French society to write fiction: “But, in the 1890s, an intellectual generation succeeded the economic and social emancipation generation.”¹³ It was in response to the virulent antisemitism of the Dreyfus affair, according to this source, that a small handful of writers—including André Spire (1868–1966), Edmond Fleg (1874–1963), Jean-Richard Bloch (1884–1947), and most significantly Marcel Proust (1871–1922)—began to confront the difficult realities facing modern French Jews in fiction as well as poetry.¹⁴

And yet, while researching my last book, on historical representation in nineteenth-century France, I came across the historical novel *La juive* [The Jewess], published in 1835 by a Jewish woman from Bor-

deaux named Eugénie Foa. Written in the descriptive style of Walter Scott, this melodramatic page-turner, set in eighteenth-century Paris, tells the story of a Jewish woman who falls in love with a handsome Christian nobleman and dies as a result of her illicit passion. When I started to become interested in the question of Jewish literature a few years later, I went back to Foa and discovered that, beginning in 1830, she wrote a series of novels and stories about Jews and Judaism. These works fascinated me because of the way they used the popular generic forms of the day—including those of the historical and sentimental novel—to confront the central problems of Jewish modernity, including intermarriage, conversion, and the conflict between personal freedom and Jewish tradition. It seemed that this was evidence that a French Jew of the early nineteenth century in fact had made an attempt at writing fiction. But was Foa a lone case?

I knew that a few popular French writers of the nineteenth century were Jews, including Léon Gozlan (1803–1866), the prolific novelist, playwright, and biographer of Balzac, and Adolphe d’Ennery (1811–1899), the equally prolific playwright, librettist, and novelist.¹⁵ They did not, however, write about Jews.¹⁶ Although they might shed light on, or rather epitomize, the process of assimilation precisely through their failure to represent Jews or Judaism, their writing does not offer the kind of rich insight into the French Jewish experience that I found in Foa. Then I turned to the archive, or rather to *Les Archives*. I began to read the new French Jewish press of the period, especially the two major monthly Jewish newspapers founded in the early 1840s, *Les Archives Israélites* and *L’Univers Israélite*. These journals, which continued to thrive until World War II, published a great deal of writing in many genres, including fiction, and all of it depicted Jews. These journals also published reviews of other works, including much fiction that I was able to locate at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which finally convinced me that Foa had in fact inaugurated a trend.

This book represents my attempt to recover the forgotten tradition of nineteenth-century French Jewish fiction and to interpret it in light of both Jewish and French history. I focus on the novels and short stories produced in the period 1830–1870 by the first generation of Jews born as French citizens. This span, covering the July Monar-

chy (1830–1848), the Second Republic (1848–1852), and the Second Empire (1852–1870), represents the point at which Jewish faith in the path of emancipation was at its highest level, following the fall of the conservative Restoration monarchy (1815–1830) and before the outbreak of *fin de siècle* antisemitism. I ask what the fiction produced by French Jews at this moment of greatest confidence in their social integration has to tell us about the nature of Jewish modernity, about the processes of acculturation and assimilation, and about the role of literature, specifically French literature, in theorizing this struggle. I also ask what this fiction tells us about the place of minority groups in France and about the possibilities for forging particular identities within the French universalist tradition, which, as Naomi Schor has noted, grants rights not to groups but only to individuals, conceived as abstract, neutral subjects.¹⁷ Might French Jewish fiction lead us to revise our assumptions not only about the failure of nineteenth-century French Jews to contribute to Jewish culture but also about the French Republican hostility to all public manifestations of group identification?

In *Inventing the Israelite* I argue that fictional narrative served French Jews as a unique kind of laboratory for experimenting with new identities.¹⁸ Because of its imaginative nature, fiction provided nineteenth-century French Jews with a way to envision situations that had not necessarily presented themselves in the world but that could present themselves. It let them test possibilities, imagine scenarios, and work out their implications. And because narrative always unfolds in a time sequence—with a beginning, middle, and end—it provided a particularly apt way to explore what might happen to a given social actor in a given situation.¹⁹ Fictional narrative, I suggest, offered a way for French Jews to think through their new historical situation.

I intend this book to speak to those interested in French literature and history as well as to those interested in Jewish literature and history. I enter the conversations in each of these areas while simultaneously speaking across disciplinary boundaries by showing what each field has to offer the other. By revealing the existence of a specifically *French* Jewish literature in the nineteenth century, I contribute to the ongoing effort to correct the myopia in Jewish studies resulting from a

traditional focus on the German case—emblemized by Jacob Katz’s *Out of the Ghetto*—as the paradigm for Jewish modernity.²⁰ Similarly, by bringing to light a uniquely *Jewish* brand of French fiction, I show how minority difference has inhabited modern French literature from the start. Literary analysis, then, becomes a vehicle for historical analysis, just as historiographic debates provide the necessary framework for making sense of these little-known novels and short stories. And although I draw throughout this book on literary and historical theorists, my goal is to reveal how these fiction writers were themselves theorists of the modern French Jewish experience.

In the remainder of this introduction, I sketch out some of the more specific contributions I see this book making. First, however, I present a bit of background on the history of Jews in modern France. I begin this survey with the French Revolution, the great turning point in the history of France’s Jews—indeed, in the history of all Jews—the moment at which they first became full and equal citizens of a modern nation. My goal in this introduction, as throughout the book, is to make this material both accessible to those who know little about Jewish or French history and interesting to those who know a lot. Accordingly, I have tried to emphasize the ways in which the history of France’s Jews sheds new light on familiar topics in French historiography. I have also tried to call attention to the features that make the French case unique in modern Jewish history.²¹

Modern French Jews in Historical Perspective

Although France expelled the Jews definitively in 1394, several Jewish communities had taken root on French soil by the eighteenth century. At the time of the Revolution of 1789, approximately 40,000 Jews lived in France.²² These included the roughly 5,000 Sephardim (Jews from Spain and Portugal) who had fled the Inquisition to settle in southwestern France, in Bordeaux and nearby Bayonne, beginning in the fifteenth century.²³ Roughly 30,000 Ashkenazim (Jews of German origin) lived in the northeastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, which became part of France in the seventeenth century. The

papal states in and around Avignon in the south, which became part of France in 1791, were home to several thousand Jews who lived in ghettos, called *carrières*, into the eighteenth century. In addition, about 500 to 800 Jews lived in Paris, where they were technically not allowed before the Revolution. Most of these clandestine Parisian Jews originated from the three other poles of French Jewish settlement.²⁴

By the time of the Revolution, the Sephardic Jews of southwestern France had achieved a certain amount of integration into French society, although they retained their Jewish communal ties. They spoke French, owned land, and participated actively in the economic and political life of the region.²⁵ The same was not true for the Ashkenazic Jews in Alsace and Lorraine. These Jews more closely resembled their coreligionists in eastern Europe. Forbidden from inhabiting most large towns or cities and prevented from engaging in most trades and professions, they lived dispersed in small rural villages, spoke Western Yiddish, and eked out meager livings in petty trade, especially peddling, horse trading, and money lending.²⁶ Largely despised by their Christian neighbors, they retained a high degree of communal autonomy, with their own legal and governance structures. Whereas the Sephardim of Bordeaux were generally open to Enlightenment ideas, the Ashkenazim of Alsace and Lorraine remained bound to Orthodox, practicing traditional rabbinic Judaism. Although small pockets of Maskilim (Jewish Enlighteners) formed among the Jews allowed to live in Metz and although these eastern communities did begin to modernize slightly by the eighteenth century, the vast majority of France's eastern Jews lived much as they had since the Middle Ages.²⁷

The Revolution radically altered the fate of all of France's Jews and for the first time cast their lots together. Despite their tiny numbers (0.14 percent of a country of about 28 million), the Jews attracted a surprising amount of attention from the revolutionaries. The *cahiers de doléances*, or books of complaint compiled by the government on the eve of the Revolution, contained numerous gripes against Jewish business practices in Alsace and Lorraine, where the Jews, although poor themselves, often offered the only credit available to the local peasantry. But a desire to ameliorate this situation alone does not explain why the revolutionary legislature took up the question of the

status of the Jews in nearly thirty sessions between 1789 and 1791, despite more pressing concerns, including famine and war.

Ronald Schechter has argued that the Jews offered eighteenth-century reformers a test case for Enlightenment: If even this most backward of peoples could be made into productive citizens, then anybody could.²⁸ Voltaire held both the ancient Jews and their modern descendants to be retrograde fanatics, inherently inferior moral beings deserving of their degraded state.²⁹ But to many of his fellow philosophes, the Jews were capable of transformation. Treat the Jews fairly, provide them with secular education and economic opportunity, and their negative characteristics, the product of centuries of persecution, would fade away. So went the liberal argument of the Abbé Henri Grégoire, the revolutionary priest from Lorraine, who argued first in a prizewinning pamphlet and then before the Constituent Assembly that Jews should be made citizens.³⁰

The decision to grant the Jews citizenship seemed to follow naturally from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, promulgated on August 26, 1789, which stated that “all men are born, and remain, free and equal in rights.” The implications of this universalist statement did not apply to all in practice, however. The revolutionaries at first denied all non-Catholics the right to hold office, restricted the vote to those who paid a substantial tax, delayed emancipating slaves until 1794, and never allowed women to vote.³¹ The revolutionaries nevertheless eventually decided to grant citizenship to Protestants and Jews as part of a general move to dissolve corporations and dismantle the structures of communal autonomy that threatened to intervene between the individual and the new revolutionary state.

Arguing before the Constituent Assembly, the liberal Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre linked the granting of citizenship to the Jews to the renunciation of their corporate status: “To the Jews as a Nation, nothing; to the Jews as individuals, everything,” he proclaimed.³² For Clermont-Tonnerre, individual Jews could become citizens but must give up their communal political structures—their local governance and legal systems—in exchange. However, the situation was complicated by the fact that the Jews continued to adhere to distinct groups. The Jewish communities of Paris, Bordeaux, and Alsace-

Lorraine all petitioned separately for citizenship, and the Sephardim were especially desirous to avoid what they considered an abasement of their status through inclusion with their less acculturated coreligionists from eastern France.

The revolutionary Constituent Assembly eventually granted citizenship to (male) Jews in two separate decrees. First, the Sephardic Jews of the southwest became citizens in January 1790, and then the mass of Ashkenazic Jews followed in September 1791. The Jews in the papal states were included with the Sephardic Jews in the first decree and became citizens when these territories joined France in 1791.³³ This revolutionary gesture marks the first time a modern nation specifically and deliberately emancipated the Jews, removing all legal obstacles to their civil equality. By contrast, Jews in England could not vote until 1835 and could not sit in Parliament until 1858, and many German Jews did not gain citizenship until German unification in 1870. In the United States, Jews had civil rights from colonial times but were never singled out for emancipation. After American independence and despite the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which prohibited national laws establishing religion, Jews in some states could not hold office and faced other legal restrictions until late in the nineteenth century.³⁴

As Napoleon conquered Europe, he brought emancipation to the Italian, Dutch, and German Jews.³⁵ In France, however, Napoleon's policies toward the Jews were mixed. On the one hand, he established Judaism as an official religion, on a par with Catholicism and Protestantism, through the creation of the Jewish Consistory, a governmental committee elected by Jewish notables, which tightly controlled all aspects of Jewish religious practice and subjected them to the scrutiny of the state. He also convened a body of Jewish notables and rabbis from France and Italy, which he dubbed "the Grand Sanhedrin" in reference to a legal body from ancient Israel, as a means of gaining religious sanction for Jewish social integration. On the other hand, he issued a number of discriminatory decrees regulating Jewish business practices in Alsace.³⁶

Following Napoleon's downfall, the government of the Bourbon Restoration was generally liberal in its policies concerning Jews even as it reinstated Catholicism as the state religion. When Napoleon's

discriminatory decrees expired in 1818, the Restoration did not renew them. Louis-Philippe, who replaced the Bourbons after the Revolution of 1830, took a giant step forward by instituting official parity between the three major religions. In 1831, he put rabbis on the state payroll (like Catholic priests and Protestant pastors). This gesture—the first time Judaism became a state-subsidized religion in any modern nation—had the paradoxical effect of problematizing Jewish group affiliation in France. Before 1831, French Jews had paid a special tax to support their synagogues; after 1831 the government picked up the tab. The state had cut one of the last tangible cords that tied many Jews to their community.

Freed from the struggle over emancipation that occupied Jews in other European countries and freed from the restrictions that excluded them from schools and professions, individual French Jews achieved unparalleled success in the nineteenth century. As in other countries, Jews particularly excelled in business and the arts. Only in France, however, did unconverted Jews reach the highest levels of government, beginning in the 1830s.³⁷ In the 1840s, three Jews were elected to the Chamber of Deputies.³⁸ Following the Revolution of 1848, Jews occupied two of eight ministerial positions in the provisional government and continued to hold high ministerial posts in the Second Empire (1852–1870).³⁹ Jewish participation in government would accelerate under the Third Republic (1870–1940), despite an increase in antisemitism during this period.⁴⁰ In the twentieth century, France had five prime ministers of Jewish origin.⁴¹ And unlike in most other European countries, the French army promoted Jews to officer ranks from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The fact that the Dreyfus affair took place in France can be traced not only to the residual antisemitism of the French army but also to that institution's democratic openness, for Dreyfus had achieved the rank of captain despite practicing Judaism. According to Pierre Birnbaum, the army represented a privileged vector of social integration for French Jews in the nineteenth century, especially for Alsatian Jews.⁴²

But although individual Jews achieved remarkable success in a variety of fields in the nineteenth century, a large percentage of France's Jews remained quite poor and only partly acculturated. This is true

for many of those Jews who stayed behind in rural villages in Alsace and Lorraine as well as for the constantly increasing numbers of Jews who moved to large towns and cities. Christine Piette estimates that in 1840, 16.6 percent of the Jewish population of Paris was bourgeois, about the same as in the general population.⁴³ She further estimates that roughly 20 percent lived in poverty, with those in between engaged mostly in small trade. Throughout the century, however, increasing numbers of Jews throughout France began to adopt bourgeois occupations and comportments. This transformation can be traced through the disappearance of the Jewish peddler, the sign of Jewish economic and social backwardness and a figure of opprobrium for both antisemites and acculturating Jews. According to Paula Hyman, in Lyon the percentage of peddlers among the Jews declined from 75 percent in 1810 to roughly 50 percent in 1830 to only 13 percent in 1860.⁴⁴

As the Jews joined the bourgeoisie, they shed many of the trappings of traditional Jewish life, such as the use of Yiddish, and often ceased to attend synagogue as well. However, although numerous voices among both the Reform and the Orthodox complained about the rising tide of religious indifference in the Jewish community, relatively few French Jews chose to convert in the nineteenth century, perhaps because they had little to gain from it. According to Philippe-E. Landau, who consulted church archives, there were only 74 conversions in Paris during the July Monarchy and 222 during the Second Empire.⁴⁵ This is another feature that sets the French case apart from the German, for in Germany conversion remained the essential “admission ticket” (the phrase is attributed to Heinrich Heine) to many universities and liberal professions before 1870. Unlike in England, where Protestant conversion societies flourished in the nineteenth century, the French Catholic Church made few concerted efforts to convert the Jews after the July Monarchy.⁴⁶ Historians have also estimated that intermarriage rates in France were likewise comparatively low, with acculturated Jews often marrying other acculturated Jews in the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ This suggests that communal affiliation and ethnic ties outlasted religious practice.

France’s Jewish population grew rapidly throughout the first half

of the nineteenth century. There were 70,000–80,000 Jews out of a total French population of 33 million in 1840.⁴⁸ By 1861 this number had risen to 95,881, only to fall by 45 percent following the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany in 1870.⁴⁹ Paris saw the most significant growth in its Jewish population throughout the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Whereas only 500 to 800 Jews lived in the capital in 1789, the official census of the Consistory in 1809 put the Jewish population of the capital at 2,908. By 1840, this number had risen to roughly 9,000.⁵¹ And by 1880, following the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, which prompted many Jews to move to the French capital from the eastern provinces, the Jewish population of Paris had grown to 40,000, a nearly hundredfold increase in less than a century.

Although some of this increase was the natural result of high birth-rates, the Jewish population explosion in Paris also resulted from immigration. Jews came to Paris from not only Alsace-Lorraine but also other European countries in the mid-nineteenth century, especially Germany. These German migrants shared cultural, religious, linguistic, business, and familial ties with the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine and integrated into their communities. Although some Jews also came to France from eastern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, it was not until after 1880 that France saw a large influx of *Ostjuden* (Jews from eastern Europe), who were on the whole much more Orthodox, traditionalist, and working class than the Jews from Alsace-Lorraine and Germany. These Jews tended to congregate in certain neighborhoods (the Marais as well as the eighteenth and twentieth arrondissements of Paris) and retained the use of Yiddish to a much greater extent than the Jews from Alsace-Lorraine and Germany.

In many ways the cultural and class differences between these two groups of Ashkenazic Jews at the end of the nineteenth century anticipated the divide between the Ashkenazic Jews and the Jews who arrived from North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt) following decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. In the period I am considering (1830–1870), however, the Jewish community of France was more cohesive. The main distinction at the start of the period lay between the Ashkenazic Jews from Alsace-Lorraine and Germany on the one side and the less numerous Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux (and

the Jews of the former papal states), who were relatively more acculturated and whose religious rite was slightly different, on the other. But even these differences gradually ceased to signify in the nineteenth century, as the two groups increasingly intermarried and developed close social and economic ties.

In the following sections I take a step back from this rapid survey of the history of Jews in modern France to examine four key issues in greater detail. These four issues bring into focus the features that make nineteenth-century French Jews unique in both French and Jewish history: their struggle to assert their Jewish particularity within the French universalist tradition, their status as representative modern subjects, their special relation to French culture, and their position in debates over religion and state secularism. I provide a sense of the scholarly debates around these issues in order to isolate the ways in which this book makes new contributions. My goal is to reveal how the forgotten fiction produced by Jews in nineteenth-century France sheds important light on their history.

Negotiating the Universal and the Particular

Perhaps the most central question concerning nineteenth-century French Jews is whether or not, or to what extent, they abandoned their Jewish specificity by becoming French citizens. To many, the emancipation bargain presented to the Jews during the French Revolution seemed to be a zero-sum game; their transformation from Jews into Israelites—as the acculturated French citizens of the Mosaic persuasion preferred to call themselves—required the exchange of Jewish specificity for the universal rights of the French Republican tradition. As Birnbaum puts it, “Their entry into the public sphere, which transforms them into citizens, embodies the logic of a State in which universalist principles imply the disappearance of all particularisms: in this sense, the fate of the Jews is a product of that top-down emancipation, which is hostile to all communitarian forms of social or political organization.”⁵² In other words, the French revolutionary tradition’s universalizing logic, the same logic that provided the