

Introduction

Jewish Cultural Memory and the German Historical Novel

In every age, alongside the obvious phenomenon of assimilation, we can notice the dissimilation which always accompanies it.

Franz Rosenzweig (1922)¹

If historical fiction is a staple of the national imagination, how might a minority relate to it? What does it mean for a minority to imagine its history in a majority language, as it seeks to integrate in an age of nationalism and *embourgeoisement*? This book is a study of how German-Jewish novelists used images from the Jewish past, most notably from the Sephardic-Jewish past, to define their place in German culture and society. Building upon the work of Pierre Nora and Yosef H. Yerushalmi, I argue that Jewish historical fiction was a “realm of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), a cultural form that functioned as a parallel, and indeed as a corrective to the modern, demythologizing project of secular Jewish history writing (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*).² *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions* shows how, for German-Jewish writers throughout most of the nineteenth century, for major authors like Heinrich Heine and Berthold Auerbach as well as for “minority” authors like Ludwig Philippson, the Sephardic past came to represent both hopes for integration and fears about assimilation. For modernist German-Jewish writers from the 1890s to the 1920s, by contrast, Sephardic stories gave shape to their concerns with anti-Semitism and Zionism. Finally, this book shows how, after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Jewish writers and artists in Nazi Germany and in exile employed these very same images from the Sephardic past (Inquisition, expulsion, auto-da-fé) to grapple with the nature of fascism, the predicament of exile, and the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust. The term I use to describe this dynamic of minority memory is *dissimilation*, a term first coined by the German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig in a diary entry in 1922.

Dissimilation is a response to a conventional view of German Jewry, which has long been defined in popular representations by the polemical

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term *assimilation*. To integrate into German society, so the conventional view, Jews all too often paid the price of abandoning their heritage. The Jewish rush to enter mainstream culture life in Germany was a “negative integration,” a servile conformity which was unmasked as a tragic illusion by anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.³ In a 1934 illustration to the Passover Haggadah, by Arthur Szyk, the assimilated Jew is portrayed as the “wicked son” (Figure 1). In Szyk’s illustration, an image that is contiguous with racist anti-Semitic caricature, “Jewish” features are legible beneath the German clothes: assimilation is a “German fiction” which tries but fails to escape the “Jewish past.” By contrast, this book, *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*, argues that the Jewish embrace of German-language culture also took on forms which encompassed a different relation between “Jewish past” and “German fiction,” one that makes necessary a different view of integration and acculturation. By imagining, indeed reinventing Jewish history through German-language historical novels, German Jews asserted their own unique identity as they integrated into larger narratives of German and European history. If the conventional view portrays the Jewish contribution to German culture as something “beyond Judaism”—German Jews as the truest devotees of the ideal of *Bildung* and of the classical tradition of German “high” culture⁴—then an examination of German-Jewish popular culture leads us to a different conclusion. Dissimilation is the crystallization of a new form of Jewish identity and distinctiveness that occurs as part of the dynamic of acculturation and alongside the phenomenon of assimilation.⁵

In recent decades, many scholars of Jewish social and cultural history have kept the concept of assimilation at arm’s length, as they have addressed the question of the extent to which German-Jewish modernity represents a rupture with Jewish collective memory. As Yerushalmi posits in *Zakhor*, the project of secular Jewish history was a challenge to Jewish collective memory. The Wissenschaft des Judentums school in early nineteenth-century Germany, the first generation of modern Jewish historians, turned to the Jewish past with an Enlightenment zeal to demythologize. Yet curiously, from the very same milieu that produced this Jewish version of German historicism, a new genre arose: modern Jewish historical fiction. What meanings did these fictional Jewish histories—written in German and often published and



Figure 1. Arthur Szyk, *The Four Sons* (1934). The “wicked son” portrayed as an assimilated German. Image courtesy of The Robbins Family Collection. Reproduced with the cooperation of the Arthur Szyk Society, Burlingame, Calif., www.szyk.org.

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distributed by the same Jewish publishers and book clubs in that popularized the histories of Isaac Markus Jost and Heinrich Graetz in nineteenth-century Germany⁶—have in an age of secular historiography? What did it mean for a minority to imagine its history in the majority language in the age of modern nationalism? The answer, as I argue in this book, was the creation of a German-Jewish *minority culture* in which historical fiction played a central role. By integrating into German culture and society (i.e., writing German-language fiction), Jewish writers transformed rather than rejected the Jewish past. Dissimilation is fundamentally linked with historical memory. If, as Benedict Anderson famously asserts, historical fiction is a literary genre par excellence of the nationalist imagination, forging new identities vertically across time and horizontally across space through modern print media, then the German-Jewish example shows how historical fiction also became a vehicle for minority self-definition.⁷ In the form of German historical fiction about Jewish history (even by authors with integrationist politics), the Jewish embrace of German culture was thus not an act of assimilation but rather a reinvention of Jewish identity and historical memory better termed dissimilation.

Central to this new German-Jewish cultural memory and dissimilation was a notable fixation on the Sephardic-Jewish past. Related to the ways the nineteenth-century German Jews employed Moorish-style synagogue architecture to define their integration into the visual culture of German historicism while also asserting their religious and cultural distinctiveness,⁸ German-Jewish historical fiction centered on themes of *convivencia* (the flourishing of Jewish culture in Islamic Spain), conversion, Inquisition, and expulsion to project hopes for integration as well as fears of assimilation and anti-Semitism. In *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*, I explore how major nineteenth-century German writers like Heinrich Heine (*Der Rabbi von Bacherach* [The Rabbi of Bacherach]) and Berthold Auerbach (*Spinoza*), and writers like Ludwig Philippson and Marcus Lehmann, who wrote in German for almost exclusively Jewish audiences, used the Spanish-Jewish past as a source for their self-understanding in German culture and society.

One of my main arguments in *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions* is that Jewish writers in the nineteenth century established a vocabulary of historical symbols that became a source for Jewish cultural memory

as it faced the challenges of the twentieth century. The same historical symbols that served integrationist Jewish writers (whether of liberal or orthodox cast) in the nineteenth century became a source of cultural memory for writers reacting to the crises of Jewish identity in the Weimar and National Socialist eras. In Chapters 3 and 4, I recount how political Zionists like Alfred Nossig and cultural avant-gardists like Else Lasker-Schüler emulated and “rewrote” the works of Heine, Ludwig Philippson, and others to address a new, virulent anti-Semitism and the wish for a Jewish cultural renaissance: a new form of dissimilation.

In Chapter 5, I argue that with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Jewish writers such as Hermann Sinsheimer, Hermann Kesten, and Ernst Sommer were able to respond by using images from the Sephardic past. For Jewish writers in the 1930s, stories of Inquisition, expulsion, and auto-da-fé were now used to grapple with the Nazi attempt to remove Jews from German culture. As I detail in Chapter 5, by 1934 the National Socialists had adopted “dissimilation” as a programmatic word for their anti-Jewish campaign. For Jewish novelists, historical fiction became an important cultural and political resource with which to respond to Nazi persecution as well as to come to terms with the dashed dreams of nineteenth-century German Jewish writers.

Dissimilation and Assimilation

In the 1930s, the Nazis’ campaign for their version of dissimilation unleashed a debate in the German-Jewish world. Jewish nationalists and Jewish integrationists criticized each other, while the National Socialists hounded all Jews. Historians of Jewish history adopted the term dissimilation in the meaning that the Nazis had given it, as Salo Wittmayer Baron did in *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (1937),⁹ but the word also began to be used in a wider sense, as Jews, under the pressure of Nazi anti-Semitism, began to reconsider the terms of Jewish integration throughout history. Around 1990, perhaps after sufficient historical distance to the tragedy of the 1930s and 1940s had been reached, historians of German-Jewish history began to express discontent with the assimilation paradigm in the historiography, which was increasingly seen as outdated. David Sorkin and Shulamit

Volkov were influential historians who reached for new terms, as they turned their attention to the development of distinct minority spheres and dissimilar cultural practices that developed as part of the general phenomena of the acculturation and *embourgeoisement* of the majority of Jews in nineteenth-century Germany. Sorkin and Volkov employed terms such as *subculture* and rediscovered *dissimilation* to describe the secularization of Jewish life and the creation of new forms of Jewish distinctiveness.¹⁰ The four-volume synthetic work edited by Michael A. Meyer and Michael Brenner, *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, shied away from *assimilation* as an analytic term in favor of the more neutral *acculturation*.¹¹ David Sorkin's article "Emancipation and Assimilation: Two Concepts and Their Application to German-Jewish History" argued that *assimilation*, deeply encumbered by the 1930s polemics of Zionists versus integrationists was too ideologically laden to be analytically useful in conveying how German Jews fashioned themselves and interacted with their environment.¹² It is in this spirit that the term *dissimilation* attracted the attention of contemporary scholars.

Historians and scholars of Jewish literature and thought have used *dissimilation* in a number of ways, often not with reference to Franz Rosenzweig. (Historians also do not use *dissimilation* in the technical sense it has in the field of linguistics, that is, to describe the way sounds are changed to distinguish them from neighboring sounds within a word.) Dennis B. Klein used *dissimilation* in his critique of Peter Gay to describe the limits of Jewish integration in Central Europe and the self-conscious affirmation of cultural distinctiveness by a small but significant minority of Jews.¹³ Shulamit Volkov first employed the term to describe the dynamics at work in assimilation as an ongoing process, with immigrant Eastern Jews reminding German Jews of their own status as relative newcomers on the assimilation ladder.¹⁴ Volkov then expanded her use of *dissimilation*, as a term relative to *assimilation*, to connote the fluid synthesis of integration and isolation that characterized Jewish life in nineteenth-century Germany.¹⁵ Some writers have used *dissimilation* in Volkov's earlier sense to illustrate how German and eastern European Jews participated in a Jewish cultural renaissance in the years before and after World War I. For example, Gavriel Rosenfeld uses the term in his study of art criticism in the journal *Ost*

und West, and Ritchie Robertson uses the concept, in his consummate study *The Jewish Question in German Literature*, as an organizing rubric for a broad historical phase in Jewish literature, for works influenced by cultural Zionism and the encounter with *Ostjuden*.¹⁶

Franz Rosenzweig's use of *dissimilation*, as introduced in his diary entry of April 3, 1922, posits a permanent, transhistorical dynamic in the history of the Jews that nonetheless belongs to a concrete historical moment. Stéphane Mosès explains Rosenzweig's use of the term as both a dialectic of identity construction located at the rift between differing notions of historical experience (Jewish vs. Western-Christian) and a movement that signifies a "withdrawal from Western civilization and return to the sources of Jewish identity."¹⁷ For Rosenzweig, dissimilation is a countermovement that accompanies assimilation. The crucial distinction is that it is a conscious step in the affirmation of a Jewish identity.

In *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*, I use *dissimilation* in the dual sense that Franz Rosenzweig intended it. On the one hand, I argue that Jewish historical fiction is indeed a dialectic between Jewish historical narratives and Western, secular notions of historical time, a perennial dynamic of the Jewish encounter with other cultures, but one that experienced a greater tension in an era of emerging ideas of the nation. On the other hand, in the five chapters that follow, I show how dissimilation took different forms at specific historical junctures. At each stage, Jewish historical fiction was an articulation of Jewish identity in response to the non-Jewish environment. In Chapter 1, I examine one of the earliest modern Jewish historical novels in a Western language, whose subject—Baruch Spinoza—is paradigmatic for the Jewish encounter with modernity. In Berthold Auerbach's hands, dissimilation is a Jewish response to a demand for radical assimilation, a secularization that erases Jewish identity. Jewish historical fiction is the secular culture that articulates Jewish difference. This created a model which later writers follow, as they create a German-language minority culture.

In Chapter 3, I focus on these German-Jewish "minority" writers including Ludwig Philippson, Marcus Lehmann, and Hermann Reckendorf in order to elucidate the meaning of dissimilation in an age of emerging national culture and Jewish *embourgeoisement*. For these mid-nineteenth century writers, Jewish popular novels on Sephardic themes

projected nineteenth-century European conceptions of religion, family, and politics backward into Jewish history as a means to give historical legitimacy to various shades of integrationist Jewish identities (Reform, neo-Orthodox). Dissimilation was, as Rosenzweig saw it, the flipside of assimilation, a crystallization of Jewish identity in tandem with the formation of new German identities.

By the later nineteenth-century, however, as the anniversary of 1492 was commemorated in 1892, the ambitions of the integrationist form of dissimilation began to give way to an understanding of dissimilation as estrangement from European culture in the sense of political and cultural Zionism, as a response to anti-Semitism. In Chapter 3, I show the work of the German-language writer Alfred Nossig to be just such a response, as I also explore the translations and adaptations of German-language novels from the mid-nineteenth century into Hebrew and Yiddish in the later nineteenth century,¹⁸ illustrating the transformation of *minority* culture into *national* culture, something that moves beyond dissimilation.

Dissimilation, drawing upon its meaning in linguistics, is of course always fundamentally bound up with language. The transposition of German-language minority culture into Hebrew-language national culture is one important case, and the search for a “Jewish” literary language in the context of the Jewish cultural renaissance of the Weimar years is another. In Chapter 4, I explore the modernist writer Else Lasker-Schüler’s 1921 novella *Der Wunderrabbiner von Barcelona* (The Wonder-Working Rabbi of Barcelona). As a rewriting of Heine and Ludwig Philippson, Lasker-Schüler’s book is on one level a renewal of the tradition of German-Jewish Sephardism, a perceptive reinterpretation of minority cultural memory that speaks to the crisis of German Jews after World War I. Yet her modernist language experiments illustrate another level of dissimilation. Lasker-Schüler was one of the rare German-Jewish writers to engage on a literary level with the literary-political concerns of Hebrew and Yiddish modernists in 1920s Berlin, and my interpretation of *Der Wunderrabbiner von Barcelona* revises our view of her work: Lasker-Schüler was in no way a cryptic and individualistic poet but one whose modernist prose gives linguistic shape to dissimilation as the positive articulation of Jewish cultural (and historical) difference in German.