

How Jews Became Germans

DEBORAH HERTZ

How Jews Became Germans

THE HISTORY OF CONVERSION AND
ASSIMILATION IN BERLIN

Yale University Press
New Haven &
London

Published with assistance from the Louis Stern Memorial Fund.

Copyright © 2007 by Yale University.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Set in Sabon Roman by Keystone Typesetting, Inc., Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania.

Printed in the United States of America by Thomson-Shore, Inc., Dexter, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hertz, Deborah Sadie.

How Jews became Germans : the history of conversion and assimilation in Berlin / Deborah Hertz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-300-11094-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Jews — Germany — Berlin — History. 2. Jews — Conversion to Christianity — Germany — Berlin — History. 3. Berlin (Germany) — Ethnic relations. 4. Jews — Germany — Berlin — Identity. I. Title.

DS134.3.H47 2007

305.892'4043155 — dc22

2007013495

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated to the activists in the Israeli peace movement

Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
1	The Black Notebooks	1
2	The Era of Religious Conversion, 1645–1770	17
3	The Coming of Age of Rahel Levin, 1771–1810	43
4	Emancipation and War, 1811–1813	77
5	High Culture Families and Public Satire, 1814–1819	124
6	The Entrance Ticket to European Civilization, 1820–1833	165
	Epilogue	217
	Appendix	223
	Notes	227
	Index	266

Acknowledgments

I have written this book because I cannot decide whether a passionate ethnic identity is necessary for personal happiness. Many family and individual experiences have contributed to my obsession with this vexing question. When I was growing up in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in the 1950s, my parents would not allow us to celebrate Christmas with my first cousins, whose father had converted to become a Catholic. The message was that he and his kin were to be exiled from our warm extended family. I often wondered whether these relatives suffered from their exclusion. Later, as a young adult in the late sixties, I was the one who sought to escape family bonds. I raged mightily against my family's attempts to control my life. To be 18 in 1968 was to live through a harsh war of the generations, a vivid, rowdy era, full of conflict at every turn.

Over the years I have wrestled with how to balance freedom with belonging. When and how can immersion in a cohesive culture bring satisfaction and pleasure, energy and creativity? When is such immersion a prison for the body, mind, and heart? I feel lucky to have found in the German Jewish past a historical landscape filled with individuals, movements, and institutions which help me work through this universal dilemma. History is at once an objective scholarly project and a huge therapeutic space. The past is buried in obscure books in libraries and yet ever present, ready to serve as a mirror to very personal quests.

When I first discovered the Berlin conversion records during my dissertation research, I knew that when my work on the Berlin salons was finished, I would write a book on conversion in the Berlin past. For years I joked that the book about those converting into Judaism was the thin book, whereas my book about conversion out of Judaism was the thick book. In the end the book is perhaps not so thick, but it has, alas, taken all too many years to complete.

Along this long road I have received much gracious help from many institutions. Dr. Fischer, Frau Scharf, and Dr. Wischnath of the Evangelische Zentralarchiv in Berlin were patient with my inquiries. Frau Cécile Lowenthal-Hensel suggested my first visit to that important archive. The German Academic Exchange Service and the State University of New York at Binghamton generously funded my research at the Zentralarchiv. Archivists at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City, the Central Archive of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, the Hessisches Hauptarchiv Wiesbaden, the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, and the Berlin municipal archives all graciously helped me find the right primary sources.

I truly embarked on this book in the summer of 1987, while teaching at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Over my sixteen years there, Warren Wagar, Norman Stillman, Thomas Dublin, Katherine Kish Sklar, Sarah Elbert, Maureen Turim, Linda Forcey, Josephine Gear, Leslie Levene, Jean Quataert, and the late Constance Coiner and the late Joan Smith were stimulating, resourceful colleagues. Krista O'Donnell was a treasured research assistant. During my Fulbright year at the Hebrew University in 1987–88, I explored many of the book's themes with Paul Mendes-Flohr, Steven Aschheim, Robert Wistrich, Gordon Fellman, Aaron Back, Beth Sandweiss, Rita Mendes-Flohr, Sharon Gillerman, Michael Graetz, Sassona and Yossi Yovell, Kathryn Hellerstein, and Vanessa Ochs. A year at the Harvard Divinity School in 1991–92 provided another opportunity for intensive work on the book. I am grateful to the late Catherine Prelinger and especially to Constance Buchanan for their help that year. Connie's sage advice to avoid the era of religious conversions and concentrate on the era of assimilation helped me decide on the ultimate shape of the book. Two years hence, in 1994–95, I taught at the University of Haifa while living with my family on Kibbutz Ramat Hashofet. The kibbutz provided a provocative perch for looking back at the Jewish past. I chuckled to myself reading about the Court Jews in a little kibbutz hut, wondering how we traveled from then to now. The late Eliezer Rabinovitz provided me with a fabulous work space in the kibbutz archive, and the baby nursery cared for our toddler beginning at seven in the morning! That year Kenneth Stow, Judith Tydor Baumel, Richard Cohen, Nancy and Zvi Rosenfeld, and Esther Carmel Hakim all helped me in matters practical and intellectual. I loved living in such a special destination of Jewish history.

When I moved to Sarah Lawrence College in 1996, I found another circle of special intellects who talked with me about this book, including Bella Brodzki, Roland Dollinger, Melvyn Bukiet, and Alice Olson. A semester's leave in the fall of 2001 provided necessary time to write. My year and a half at Tel Aviv University in 2002 and 2003 was made possible by Shulamith Volkov, Billie Melman, and Hannah Nave, and I am grateful for their warm hospitality. Shlomo Meyer at the Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem provided a serene work environment and my favorite collection of dusty reference books. Rahel Livne-Freudenthal, Emily Bilski, Gabriel Motzkin, Deborah Harris, Elliot Horowitz, Michael and Ilana Silber, Margalit Shilo, Shmuel Feiner, Dafna and Amotz Golan, Tal Ilan, Rene Melamid, Dominique Bourel, and Moshe and Alice Shalvi all talked avidly with me about the themes of the book.

Our friends in Princeton, New Jersey, during our seventeen years on Wheat-sheaf Lane, followed my progress with good humor and affectionate nagging, especially Esther Schor, Phyllis Mack, Ziva Gallili, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Michael Merrill, David and Sandy Abraham, Diane Krumrey, Eric Lubell, Hannah Fink, Martin Oppenheimer, Monica Lange, Hilary Brown, Diane Winston, Diane and Robert Hackett, and Barbara Mann. What fun we enjoyed on our protected little village street! I am especially grateful to the pack of wild kids who regularly trooped through our home and yard and provided a very welcome distraction from the tasks of the book. The atrium room on the C floor of the Firestone Library at Princeton University was a refuge for quiet work and a beloved space.

When I came to the University of California at San Diego in 2004 I found a marvelous combination of nature, culture, and community. Richard Elliot Friedman, William Propp, David Goodblatt, Tom Levy, David Noel Freedman, Rachel Klein, Robert Westman, Cynthia Walk, Frank Biess, and David Luft have welcomed me to this enchanted place with much graciousness. I am grateful to those who established the Herman Wouk Chair in Modern Jewish Studies and to Mr. Wouk himself for his acts of kindness. Susanne Hillman has become a valued research assistant.

Throughout my wanderings I have often relied upon a special circle of women historians who have been meeting monthly since 1977 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to discuss our work. We have shared career crises, political debates, baby clothes, advice about teenagers, and a long stream of cakes, cookies, and coffee. Members of the German Women's History Study Group teased me about my obsessions, read my work in progress, and helped me become a better historian. I cannot imagine a career in the field without this magic entourage, a miniature utopia of authentic intellectual sharing, free from the pretentious posturing that academics typically generate and endure. I thank the founding participants in this circle: Renate Briendenthal, Marion Kap-

lan, Mary Nolan, Atina Grossmann, Jane Caplan, Claudia Koonz, Bonnie Anderson, and Amy Hackett, as well as those who have joined the group more recently.

In addition, several scholars in the field of German-Jewish history have become treasured lifetime colleagues, including Steven Lowenstein, Liliane Weissberg, Monika Richarz, Frank Mecklenburg, Benjamin Maria Baader, and Elisheva Carlebach. Todd Endelman, Paula Hyman, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Harriet Barlow have been generous with their time and practical aid.

My deep roots in Minnesota have always been a sustaining resource. Rabbi Bernhard Raskas introduced me to Jewish history when I was young, and Mischa Penn of the University of Minnesota helped me find my husband, Martin, at just the right moment. Professor Otto Pflanze channeled my restless mind and helped me become a professional. My parents Lorraine and Marcus Hertz have endured my rebellions and my prodigal returns with grace. My brothers, Frederick and Robert, have long been agile debate partners and loyal siblings. Fred was an indefatigable critic of earlier drafts of the manuscript.

Along the way Debra Ginsburg, Yung Seop Lee, Michael Broderick, Jeanette Ibarra, Elliott Kanter, Daniel Kurowski, and the editors and referees at Yale University Press, especially Jessie Hunnicutt and Kay Scheuer, have helped with intellectual and technical details.

My husband, Martin Bunzl, is a wonderfully combative intellect, always ready for another good chat about life, politics, history, and philosophy. Without his lively companionship I could never endure the lonely life of a scholar. I thank him for the gift of the title of this book. Our son Noah and our daughter Zola may well have felt neglected as I crammed my work into our harried schedules. Men so often apologize to their families for the time and isolation which book creation requires. I rather apologize to my book for the time which I lavished on our children. But Martin, Noah, and Zola bring me huge joy, and I thank them for their love.

The Black Notebooks

The Nazi Genealogy Bureaucracy

Quite a number of years ago I found the *Judenkartei* in a church archive in West Berlin. This book was born on that day, when I stumbled upon several bookcases crammed with short, rectangular black notebooks. I soon learned that these notebooks were the fruit of an enormous Nazi genealogical research project. The notebooks appeared to include every single Jew who became a Protestant in Berlin, over the three centuries spanning 1645 to 1933. Converts out of Judaism had to be identified as such, because they and their descendants were false Aryans with no place in a racially purified Germany.

From my first day in the archive, I planned a book using the notebooks to write Jewish history. At first I did not know how the notebooks had been used in the Third Reich. Nor was it clear what the lessons of the notebooks would be. But I found myself immediately committed to the project. I knew that I must redeem the records from the evil system that had created them.

I found myself in the church archive in the first place because of a central question that arose in my dissertation research: Were the frequent conversions among wealthy Jewish salon women in Berlin during the last decades of the eighteenth century isolated cases, or rather part of a trend? To answer this question, I needed very detailed sources. Did more women than men leave

Judaism then? These were, after all, dramatic decades, when traditional Judaism was under attack and a reformed Judaism had not yet been created.¹

And so I traveled to Berlin, in search of conversion records. Luck smiled upon me, and I obtained a multiple-entry visa to the German Democratic Republic. Daily, I crossed the Friedrichstrasse border between the two Berlins to explore the archives in what was then called East Berlin. At the municipal city archive there I was shown several large leather volumes of baptisms, filled with irregularly sized pages of old paper, poorly bound together. On these pages were listed local parish birth records, which had been sent yearly to the Prussian government by the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist clergy from across Prussia.²

After spending some hours studying the large leather volumes, I realized that they could help me discover the truth about conversion trends. But isolating the former Jews among the baptisms was not going to be easy. The problem was that two very different kinds of *Taufen*, or baptisms, were included in the local parish lists. Most of those who were baptized were infants, often only a few days old, who had been born to Christian parents. Few Jewish converts were that young. To create a list of formerly Jewish converts, one would have to use their names and ages to separate them out from the far more numerous baptisms of infants born into Christian families.

As I was contemplating whether I should take on this mammoth task, I kept up my search for more original conversion records. Perhaps I could discover a source in which the Jewish conversions were already separated out from the infant baptisms. And so I wrote to a number of historians and archivists in Berlin, asking for leads. It felt like only a few days after the letters left my desk when the phone rang in my *Wohngemeinschaft*, my communal apartment, on the Geneisenaustrasse in West Berlin. On the line was Frau Cécile Lowenthal-Hensel from the Mendelssohn Archive, and herself a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn, German Jewry's most important eighteenth-century intellectual. Frau Lowenthal-Hensel suggested that I visit the Evangelical Central Archive on the Jebenstrasse, across the street from the Zoological Garden train station, near the center of West Berlin.

The next morning I was there. In that quiet archive inside an austere, gray-carpeted building, I first saw the *Judenkartei*, about sixty narrow rectangular black volumes. Looking about me, I saw that the shelves with the black notebooks took up only a small section of the quite enormous archive. Otherwise, the walls of the entire large room were filled floor-to-ceiling with narrow wooden file drawers containing small index cards. What was all of this, I wondered?

The archive's director, a kindly gentleman named Dr. Fischer, sat with me

and explained the story behind the notebooks and the file drawers. He recounted how Protestant pastors had been funded by the Nazi government to create precisely the detailed record of conversions for which I had been searching—a story that, after much further study, I came to understand in detail. Like so many sad tales from the twentieth century, this one had begun in 1933. Three months after taking power, in April, the Nazi government announced new laws which required that all citizens document their racial descent. The idea was that underneath religion one could find something more basic, which the Nazis called race. The plan was to replace the religious polarity of Christians and Jews with the racial polarity of Aryans and Jews.³

But it soon became obvious that replacing Christians with Aryans was not at all simple. The connections between religion and ethnicity were terribly tangled, complicated, and messy. Judaism, to be sure, is both a religion and an ethnicity. But Christianity is a trans-ethnic religion, at least in principle. For centuries Christianity has attracted believers born into very diverse ethnic groups. Entry into Judaism is by birth to a Jewish mother, whereas entry into Christianity is always by baptism or confirmation.⁴ What was problematic for the Nazi plan was that thousands and thousands of Jews had been baptized over the centuries in Germany. The point is that if Christians were to be recast into Aryans, the Jewish converts and their descendants could no longer be considered legitimate Christians.

Thus overnight there was a huge demand for genealogical knowledge. Most individuals needed to document their family tree back to their four grandparents, because that was the initial limit placed on genealogical research. But those who aspired to enter the Nazi system at a high level had to document even more generations back into their pasts. And where could one find all the original records? Few Germans knew at which church they should search for all these documents. For already back in the eighteenth century, Berlin had more than fifty Protestant churches. Here was the impetus to create the file drawers, whose cards allowed descendants to find the right parish for each ancestor. Each card in the wooden drawers in the Jebenstrasse archive listed the name, birth date, and local parish of every infant born into a Protestant family and baptized in Berlin, going back to 1645.⁵ Using the cards in the drawers, any descendant could know at which local parish they could find their original baptismal documentation.

This vast carding project was organized by Pastor Karl Themel of the Luisenstadt Church in Berlin. Using funds provided by the Ministry of the Interior, Themel assembled a crew of paid workers and volunteers, called the *Verkartungstruppen* or the “carding troops.” Their task was to copy out the details from the original records. If the ancestor was an infant born into a

Protestant family, the individual's data was noted on the cards, which went into the wooden drawers. But if the ancestor had been born into another faith and then had entered the church by baptism, the information was copied onto a notebook page, and it was these pages which filled the *Judenkartei*. Pastor Themel's carding troops filled in 50,000 cards and notebook pages per week. By 1937, they had logged over a million baptisms and conversions.⁶

In Nazi Germany, having information about someone's genealogy became a crucial kind of power. Secret ancestries discovered in dusty files were used to make accusations, perhaps demand blackmail, in private and in public. Indeed the information Pastor Themel's carding troops were collecting became ever more sensitive over time, as the meaning of the new categories sharpened, and the fateful consequences of belonging to the Jewish category grew more and more clear. It became apparent to the government that such an important classification project could not be left to church officials, no matter how vigilant they might be. This was a job for the Nazi state to supervise.

And so what began as a project of the Nazi party was soon enough taken over by the state. The special office which coordinated Pastor Themel's carding project and the other genealogy efforts was originally called the *Reichs-sippenamt*, or the Kinship Research Office, which I abbreviate here as the RSA. Before the seizure of power in January 1933, the Kinship Research Office had been a section of the Nazi party, used to inspect the racial heritage of new party members. But once the party had attained state power, the RSA became a government genealogy office, housed in the Ministry of the Interior.⁷

Now because the Nazis were so obsessed with race, the RSA was not the only office in Nazi Germany collecting the details about people's backgrounds. As was entirely typical then and there, state offices and party offices often were charged with overlapping missions. Even after the RSA became a state office in 1933, the Nazi party still maintained its own genealogy division, and so did the SS. During the 1920s, the SS had been a small organization of bodyguards for Hitler. Eventually it would become a huge and diverse "state within a state" inside the Nazi system. The point for our story is that the SS needed the information in the black notebooks, because their applicants had to be especially pure racially. Then, too, researchers writing about Jews and race also needed the data collected by the RSA. For instance, the staff of the Research Division on the Jewish Question of the National Institute for the History of the New Germany set to work calculating historical statistics on conversion and intermarriage.⁸

The RSA staff coordinated the sudden need for genealogy research in a variety of ways. They organized the transfer of original local parish registers from towns across Germany to the RSA offices in Berlin for microfilming.

They justified this mammoth project by claiming that the original registers were deteriorating quickly, due to the explosion in genealogical research after the Aryan laws of 1933. The RSA staff also instructed local pastors how to fill in the myriad versions of the family trees required of descendants. The RSA printed up long and short versions of the so-called Aryan Pass, which summarized an individual's genealogical descent. RSA staff also coordinated the work of freelance genealogy researchers who were hired by individuals to track down all of the affidavits from the archives. And when the paper trail was ambiguous, the RSA staff turned to scholars from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology in Berlin. The anthropologists working with the Institute were charged by the RSA with the task of investigating the racial status of individuals whose racial descent was disputed.⁹ Noses, head shapes, hair color, and body size were measured in an attempt to sort individuals into the Aryan or the Jewish category. The idea, if not the reality, was that the borders around each group were sharp and clear.

By 1935, most of the German population had already completed their family trees. But the RSA staff was still busy locating the odd missing bits of information needed for a precise racial label. Once they had finished filling in the narrow pages in the *Judenkartei* notebooks, they planned to create additional card indexes using marriage and even death records. The RSA director estimated that with approximately 350,000 parish register volumes from 50,000 local communities across Germany, there would be as many as 800 million birth, marriage, and death entries to be carded, at a potential cost of 80 million marks.¹⁰

The collapse of religious differences into sharply enclosed racial divisions looks to us now to be a step that made genocide possible. But we must force ourselves to see genealogical research in its proper frame, as it must have appeared in the 1930s. This point is made shockingly clear when we learn the Nazis were not the only Germans who had a passion in these years for race and genealogy. An enthusiasm for roots investigations was not necessarily a step toward genocide before the Nazis seemed to make it so. If Jews could be obsessed about race and genealogy, then surely it was a trend of the times. For example, in 1934, Arthur Czellitzer, a Jewish physician, published a little book called *Mein Stammbaum*, "My Family Tree." In the introduction Czellitzer reminded his readers that the "new government strives to make us all conscious of the importance of the family's worth to the state, and the significance of race and an interest in one's ancestors." No wonder, he noted, that Jews too were interested in these themes.¹¹ Czellitzer's words show us that even after the Nazis had taken power, Jews could value genealogical research. This truth forces us to understand why the work of the RSA did not seem so

disturbing and shocking to contemporaries, Jewish and Christian alike. Our own hindsight interferes with our ability to see the past clearly.

The RSA staff took a keen interest in the several hundred thousand individuals whose family trees were not completely Aryan. For this task Jewish birth and marriage records were indispensable. To coordinate the Jewish side of the project, the RSA staff turned to the Gesamtarchiv der deutsche Juden, or the Central Archive of the German Jews, which I abbreviate here as the GSA. The archive had been founded in 1906. Its offices were on the top floor of the community building that adjoined the Oranienburger Street synagogue, a famous synagogue in the heart of Berlin's old Jewish neighborhood. Before 1933, the GSA had been a rather obscure and modest institution. The elevator did not go up to its top floor offices, and its board of directors had not met once since 1923.¹² But beginning in 1933, it suddenly became a bustling center of research activity. Since 1920, the director of the archive had been Jacob Jacobson, a productive genealogy scholar with remarkably conservative and nationalist political views.¹³ Jacobson faced difficult practical and political problems when the GSA was swept up in the genealogy mobilization in the spring of 1933.

The plot very much thickens when we learn that Jacobson had his own genealogical ambitions, including a plan to make the GSA into a truly national collection of community records. Here, oddly enough, the RSA concurred, for it too needed to centralize Jewish community records. The RSA sent Jacobson all across Germany, collecting birth, marriage, and death registers from local synagogues. Eventually, the GSA would house the records of some 400 Jewish communities. Jacobson also found card indexes a useful research tool. In 1935, he reported that his staff had begun work on an index of all Jewish births in Berlin during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁴

Jacobson lived in dark times, and he often found himself in painful circumstances. Reading his memoir can be unsettling indeed. At one juncture in the early 1940s several of Jacobson's relatives were being deported "to the east" from Hamburg, and RSA officials sent him on a research trip to Hamburg so that he could bid goodbye to his family. But at least in his memoirs, Jacobson never articulated a critique of the RSA's ambitions or functions. He later remembered that "the curious relationship between the RSA and me was conducted in an absolutely correct fashion. However things were going, the gentlemen from the RSA were helpful to me and they had the same attitude to all the employees of the Archive."¹⁵

One of the few ways that Jacobson could help partial Jews move out of the Jewish category was to find an Aryan paternal ancestor who might have had a real or fictitious adulterous affair with a Jewish woman. The "discovery" of an

Aryan father or grandfather would render the descendant less Jewish from the Nazis' point of view. Unlike traditional Jews, who measured descent through the mother, Nazi rules allowed paternal descent. In some lights Jacobson appears to have been a naïve collaborator. But other episodes illustrate that he definitely had his principles. He was furious with those who wanted to find records which would make them less Jewish so as to secure a better position in the Nazi system. One day a Jewish-looking army officer came to the GSA, sent by his superiors to inquire into whether or not he had been born into a Jewish family. Jacobson was not particularly eager to help the officer. But he found no Jewish ancestors, and he sent the man away happy. By chance, the very next day, Jacobson found that both the man's parents were buried in one of the local Jewish cemeteries. But his knowledge came too late to hurt the officer's career as a hidden partial Jew in the army.¹⁶

Beyond his own convictions, perhaps a more salient reason for Jacobson to be cautious was that he actually had very little freedom to alter the details in the GSA records. For the RSA had created two complete sets of the Juden-kartei notebooks, one for the church archive and one for its own use. The "carding troops" had filled in two identical notebook pages for each convert included in the original parish registers. One page went into the black notebooks now housed at the Jebenstrasse archive. An identical page went into a duplicate set of notebooks in the RSA's own archive. Desperate partial Jews who came to Jacobson and begged him to destroy their ancestor's page in the notebooks could well be provocateurs, sent by the RSA staff to check up on his work.

Jacobson's life would become ever more difficult. He and his wife and son were planning to leave Germany in the fall of 1938, just after Crystal Night in November. All three had the necessary passports and visas. But hours before their departure, their passports were confiscated. After Jacobson petitioned the Gestapo, his wife's and son's papers were returned to them. Their son left immediately for England, and Frau Jacobson also left Germany just before the war began in September 1939. Jacobson himself, however, was forced to remain in Berlin to work for the RSA.

At the same time that the Jacobson family was facing such difficult decisions, institutions with far more power than the RSA decided to move the RSA offices into the Oranienburger Street Jewish community building.¹⁷ During the terrible night of November 9, later called Crystal Night because of the broken glass from Jewish stores and synagogues which covered the streets, the Gestapo seized the community records housed in many synagogues. They wanted to consolidate all of the Jewish registers, so they moved the RSA into the community building where the GSA had its offices. At one level this was a

practical decision, but the symbolism was and remains chilling. I will always remember the shock and anger I felt, sitting in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, when I came upon a piece of stationery with the letterhead Reichsippenamt, Oranienburgerstr. 28. It made me furious and sad to see that genealogy policing office publicly, graphically, identified with that Jewish space. The Nazi genealogy machine was no longer just exploiting Jacobson's labors; now they had taken over his archive. His always awkward position had become much, much worse.

The decision to keep Jacobson in Germany after 1938 shows that long after the entire German population had been placed into racial categories, the RSA was still filling drawers and notebooks with data about Jews and former Jews and partial Jews. After 1938 its domain was merely a paper empire. We know from the complaints of its director that the RSA was in fact given no role in setting Jewish policy. But the staff continued to collect genealogical records in their new quarters on Oranienburger Street.

In 1943, once Germany was declared empty of Jews, Jacobson himself was deported to the ghetto of Theresienstadt. And here too he pursued his genealogical researches, for he was allowed to take his research documents with him. He survived and later joined his family in England. Many years after the war ended, Jacobson would publish two large volumes of Berlin Jewish history, rich fruits of his long years of archival work. Indeed as I have written this book I have often turned the pages of Jacobson's wonderfully detailed volumes, searching out birth dates and correct spelling and family relationships. But it is impossible to use his books without pondering the complexities of the RSA exploitation of his focused dedication to Jewish genealogy.¹⁸ It is no easy task to determine whether he was a pathetic victim, a self-interested collaborator, or a secret hero of Jewish scholarship.

Because they were organizing Christian as well as Jewish genealogical research, in principle the RSA staff should have been well informed about the *Mischlinge*, or partial Jews.¹⁹ After all, there was considerable pressure to learn the details, since decisions about the status of the partial Jews were a subject of protracted debate among Nazi officials. Yet the supposedly hyper-efficient Nazi state had begun to murder Jews before it had finished identifying who belonged to the unlucky race. As late as the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, there was still debate about the status of the partial Jews.²⁰ In other words the question of *who was a Jew* was still continuing even after real genocide had already begun. As the policymakers sat in the villa on the shores of the Wannsee lake in Berlin, gas vans had already been used to murder over forty thousand Jews and gypsies in the extermination camp in Poland called Chelmno.²¹

What drove the so-called racial experts mad was that there were a number of ways that individuals could combine what the Nazis called race and what they called religion. First of all there were those who were of completely Jewish descent, but who were not tax-paying members of a local Jewish community. For beginning in 1876, Jews were able to resign from their local Jewish community, without becoming Christian by baptism. Quitting the community, sometimes because one was an Orthodox rather than a Liberal Jew, was called *Austritte*.²² Of course in Nazi Germany any Jew who had left the community in this way, past or present, was still labeled a racial Jew.

Then too, an individual might have had four all-Jewish grandparents, but she or he might have converted. That would make the person a full Jew by descent, but Christian by religion. Sometimes several generations had elapsed since the conversion. People who thought of their ancestry as thoroughly Christian might discover that some or all of their apparently Christian grandparents or parents had been born Jewish. There were inevitably surprises when such a significant fact had been kept secret across the generations.²³

But most of the Christians of Jewish descent were not 100 percent racially Jewish, but rather the descendants of mixed marriages. When we examine their status we see how difficult it was to halt degrees of Jewishness at any one generation. The logic of the Nazi project was the logic of infinite regress into the past, of never being clean of the Jewish stain. For instance, a debate emerged about whether converted grandparents should be classified by their race or by their religion. Some advocated going beyond the grandparent generation and introducing eighth and possibly sixteenth degrees of Jewish heritage. Indeed, it was precisely because some Germans needed extensive roots documentation that the *Judenkartei* began with the year 1645. Eventually, however, it was decided to limit most genealogical investigations to the four grandparents. This meant that if a grandparent had converted, a descendant's race was considered Aryan, rather than being retroactively re-classified as Jewish. But this stance completely contradicted the supposed aim of the entire genealogy project, which was to uncover race underneath religion. After all, the baptism of parents and the current generation was not allowed to make them into Aryans. Perhaps compromises such as this one gave the individuals forced to discover long-hidden family secrets a sense that the system had some flexibility after all.

Just how many Jewish ancestors made a descendant Jewish was a topic of intense debate during the Third Reich. Surprising as it might sound, in the beginning, in 1933, the definition of who was a non-Aryan was actually broader than it became in 1935. According to the first set of regulations issued in 1933, the non-Aryan category included quarter, half, three-quarter, and full

Jews. Later, after the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, all of the quarter Jews and some of the half Jews were removed from the non-Aryan category and declared to be functionally Aryans. Or put in other words, these individuals thus became a kind of privileged partial Jews. Here was the rare occasion where Jewish policy became more lenient over time.

In April 1933 no one knew how many Germans of Jewish descent there were. In 1933, the size of the official Jewish community was just over half a million, most of them full Jews by descent. Eventually it became clear that there were almost as many non-Aryan Christians as there were affiliated Jews. The upshot was that close to a million Germans could be labeled with some degree of Jewishness.²⁴ The policy guidelines during the war years were to allow the quarter Jews to leave the Jewish category, and to temporarily protect the half Jews from deportation. But the reprieve for the latter was only temporary; ultimately they too were slated for deportation. Luckily, the war ended too soon for many of them to meet this fate.

Looking back at the Nazi regime's efforts to classify and count and then persecute the partial Jews, it is difficult not to see their labors as steps on the road to genocide. At the time, however, those caught up in the genealogy mobilization sometimes interpreted the discoveries of the RSA in a quite positive way. One non-Aryan Christian, Victor Klemperer, an academic who lived in Germany throughout the Nazi era, was actually proud of the high number of partial Jews. Klemperer was the son of a Reform rabbi, and he converted to become a Protestant and married a Christian by descent. Klemperer was proud to be a German and disdained his Jewish heritage, even equating Zionism with Nazism as a racist regime. Obviously he agonized at the contrast between how he saw himself and how the Nazi state saw him. In a 1939 entry in his diary, Klemperer wrote that "until 1933, and for a good century before that, the German Jews were entirely German and nothing else. Proof: the thousands upon thousands of 'half' and 'quarter' Jews. Jews and Germans lived and worked together in all spheres of life."²⁵ But despite Klemperer's pride, the degree of success of intermarriage, assimilation, and integration is one of the burning questions of this book. We shall return again and again to Klemperer's conviction that the "German Jews were entirely German and nothing else."

In these pages we explore the lives of the grandparents and the great-grandparents of the partial Jews who suffered so horribly during the Nazi era. Once we enter their lives we uncover the color, detail, and nuance that Nazi genealogists necessarily obscured when they created their categories.²⁶ Here we learn the actual history of conversion by revisiting those many individual decisions which resulted in the hundreds of thousands of partial Jews and non-Aryan

Christians whose identities so vexed the Nazi policymakers. We learn that the converts in past time did not, fortunately, find themselves so rigidly defined by the harsh categories which determined the fates, the often very bitter fates, of many of their descendants.

Could Conversion Be Emancipation?

It has not been easy to concentrate on past centuries with the persistent background noise emanating from the Judenkartei notebooks. Not for a moment could I forget that the Judenkartei were used by an evil system that had robbed many descendants of the converts in the notebooks of their inner identities, their homes, and even their lives. More than most sources, the notebooks carry baggage it would be naïve to ignore. They are no ordinary source, and this was no ordinary past, for genealogy and place have been permanently severed. Perhaps if their Jewish stain was very faint and far-distant in the past, some descendants of the converts whose names were listed in the Judenkartei notebooks are today walking the streets of a town in Germany. But most descendants of those converts are more likely to make their homes in New York or Tel Aviv.

This jagged relationship between genealogical research and contemporary life is different from links between genealogy and historical research elsewhere. In England, for instance, genealogy buffs researching their families in local parish archives ultimately made it possible for the historian Peter Laslett to construct a huge population database at Cambridge University.²⁷ But, alas, there are no easy continuities for Jews in Germany, or for their historians.

My quandaries about the notebooks are illustrative of the larger challenges facing all those who contemplate the history of Jews in Germany. Just as the notebooks kept reminding me of why the Nazi state needed them, so too all who study the history of the Jews in Germany must face the difficult fact that in some ways this history ended with the Nazis. When I found the Judenkartei in the Protestant church archive during the 1970s, the history of Jewry in Germany seemed quite over. Now, as I finally finish this book, Jewish life has to a point revived there. But when I began the project most observers were sure that Jewish history had come to a decisive close when Josef Goebbels proclaimed Germany to be *Judenfrei* (free of Jews) on June 19, 1943.²⁸ How could the Holocaust not seem to be a teleology, an end destination? Indeed, after the war, some of German Jewry's finest minds saw this teleology as an aid to greater understanding. For instance Hannah Arendt argued in 1957 that "only now, after the history of the German Jews has come to an end," can we "investigate" the "unique phenomenon" of the "German-speaking Jews and their history."²⁹

Those words inspired me, gave me confidence that the German-Jewish past needed me precisely because of my own place in history. I could do justice to the early nineteenth century because the entire narrative of Jews in Germany had achieved closure, at a terrible, awful price in human suffering.

Certainly not everyone would agree that the Holocaust provides a closure that aids our search for clarity. But few would deny that the Holocaust casts a giant shadow over the German-Jewish past. We who are haunted by this past return again and again to the same questions, sifting evidence as we debate how so much could go so wrong. Evaluating assimilation is at the heart of our troubles about the German-Jewish past. For German Jews were known far and wide, were loved or hated, for what seemed at the time to be their successful assimilation. Because conversion was one of the more radical acts of assimilation possible, we cannot enter the past without pondering the postwar debates about assimilation.³⁰ The more one reads the huge literature on Jewish assimilation in Germany, the clearer it becomes that historians seem to tilt toward one pole or the other, some valuing assimilation and others pointing to its high personal and ethnic costs.

Take first the pro-assimilation point of view. For generations, Jews in Germany saw themselves and were seen as the model of successful assimilation. Polish and Russian Jews looked to Germany for refuge and inspiration. Often they saw their own mother tongue, Yiddish, as a German language, a language that could serve as their bridge to German culture. Throughout the nineteenth century Jews to the east often watched the Jews of Germany with admiration, sometimes with envy. At home in Germany, Jews had much about which they could be proud. Leo Baeck, the leading rabbi during the Nazi era, believed that the Jews in modern Germany had created the “third golden age” in Jewish history.³¹ At the time, the religious creativity, the economic success, and the cultural accomplishments of many Jews in the German lands were a notable phenomenon. Many of the leading personalities in this book have been seen from afar as exemplary cases of successful assimilation. Felix Mendelssohn, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Eduard Gans, Fanny Lewald, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Ludwig Börne, and Heinrich Heine are among those we come to know here, and we try to get behind the myths to discover the sometimes painful realities of their lives.

Across the generations, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all the way up to Hitler’s appointment as chancellor in 1933, Germany was still seen as a positive place for Jews to live. We understand this stance from listening to the character Henriette in Shmuel Agnon’s novel *Shira*. The novel is set among the German refugee academics of Jerusalem during the 1930s, during the years when it was still possible to leave Germany. Henriette

spends her days trying to obtain the necessary visas to allow her relatives to leave Germany and enter Palestine. As she proceeds with her very frustrating efforts, she ponders the troubling fate of German Jewry and comments to her husband how difficult it is to comprehend that this has all come to pass in Germany. As she says, “between yesterday and tomorrow, events occurred in Germany that transformed it into an inferno — the very country about which it was said: every Jew should bless God daily for the privilege of living there.”³² And Agnon’s Henriette had good reason to express an accurate historical perspective, for Agnon himself lived in Germany from 1913 until 1924.

Many of those whose life stories are told in this book would have agreed with Henriette that living in Germany was a privilege. But praying in thanks to the Jewish God was not the only religious choice among those who felt lucky to live there. Thousands of Jews across the German lands in the nineteenth century chose not the Jewish God but life as a Protestant. Yet few observers, then and since, have been convinced that those who converted did so because of spiritual experiences.³³ The suspicion is that motives were either careerist, because prestigious jobs in Germany were generally open only to Christians, or romantic, because ethnic intermarriage was not legal until later in the nineteenth century. In this book we meet many converts whose motives do fit the stereotypes, those who sought prestigious careers or marriage with Christians by descent. But we also meet others whose motives for converting were cultural and national. Well-to-do, educated, sophisticated Jews who were writing significant books and poems and music often saw Protestant, especially Lutheran identity as an important avenue to becoming more German on the inside.

If we discover that a convert’s motives were not truly religious, does that mean the decision to change faith was hypocritical? Over the years scholars have addressed this vexing problem by recasting the conversion problematic in post-religious terms. They have argued that in nineteenth-century Europe, many saw Christianity not so much as “a name for a religion” as “the only word expressing the character of today’s international civilization.” In the words of one historian, “a man felt he had to become a Christian in the nineteenth century in the same way he felt he had to learn English in the twentieth.”³⁴ If one interprets modern Christianity as a culture rather than a religion, the frequent lack of authentic spiritual transformation becomes less disturbing.

Sparks can still fly when contemporaries now try to defend conversion as a legitimate way to become more German, as when the novelist Martin Walser spoke at the ceremony for the Scholl Sisters Prize for Civic Courage, awarded posthumously to Victor Klemperer in November 1995. Walser, an enthusiastic

reader of Klemperer's wartime diaries, published to great acclaim in the late 1990s, declared that for Klemperer conversion had been an "act of emancipation."³⁵ The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who was in the audience, walked out of the room when Walser uttered these words. Walser's defense of conversion as emancipation is the strongest possible statement of what is at issue in this book. For Walser has articulated a view that many converts described here surely would have agreed with, and indeed celebrated. Certainly more of them would have agreed with Walser than with Habermas. My aim is to tell the historical story so that each of us, myself included, can decide whether Walser was right, in any sense and in any way. Could conversion in nineteenth-century Germany be justly described as having been a *personal emancipation*?

If the converts themselves would tend to agree with Walser, some of their friends and relatives who remained Jewish might rather have seen matters from Habermas's perspective. In the early nineteenth century, as the assimilation trend was becoming more and more visible, most of the critics of conversion were loyal to traditional Judaism. A century later, Zionist critics would concentrate more on psychological or national problems with baptism. In the era of Freud, some medical observers were convinced that many converts were "manifestly diseased," that their conversion was the "primary symptom of their mental instability." One critic argued that converts bore the sign of a "baptismal hydrocephaly."³⁶

Perhaps the most uncanny Zionist critic of assimilation was Felix Theilhaber. Theilhaber was a young physician in 1911, when he published *Der Untergang der deutschen Juden* ("The Disappearance of the German Jews"), arguing that the Jews of Germany had for several generations been involved in a kind of collective "racial suicide." Theilhaber's list of suicidal behaviors included conversion, intermarriage, late ages of marriage, low rates of marriage, and low birth rates. Looking at the patterns in place in 1911, Theilhaber predicted that by the close of the twentieth century German Jewry would have disappeared.³⁷ His forecast was discounted at the time, but he turned out to be more correct than he could ever have imagined, in the saddest way possible. He himself and his immediate family, luckily enough, emigrated to Palestine in 1935.

After the war, many Jews in Europe and beyond concluded that the tragic events of the Nazi era showed that assimilation had never actually been achieved at all, even when it seemed to be going so well. Whoever was not convinced by Theilhaber's argument in 1911, or even in 1935, may well have found his Zionist critique of assimilation quite convincing after 1945. In the years since 1945, voices lamenting assimilation in general and the assimilation of the Jews in Germany especially have only grown stronger. Moreover the

tendency to judge assimilation harshly is very much in step with wider shifts in opinion. In spite of or because of all the deadly ethnic conflict in the world, in the United States at least ethnicity is now celebrated. A mosaic of intact and distinctive cultures has replaced the model of the melting pot in American public opinion. In addition to the giant shadow of distortion cast by the Holocaust, we may well find it difficult to empathize with the dead converts because in our time many assume that a positive ethnic identity is necessary for personal happiness.

Perhaps the harshest and most eloquent critic of the German assimilation pattern was Gershom Scholem, who left Germany in 1921 and settled in Palestine, where he became a renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism. Scholem argued that it was in the early nineteenth century, the era we explore in this book, that the leading Jews in Germany turned in the wrong direction. For Scholem, these years constituted a “false start” to the modern era.³⁸ He fumed at the traditional elites, who too easily gave up their religious autonomy as the price for civic emancipation. Scholem denied that there had ever been an authentic symbiosis of Jewish and German culture. He criticized precisely the achievements which had always evoked praise, pointing out that few Jews who wrote music or poetry or pursued scholarship brought Jewish ideas, values, or symbols into their work.³⁹

Some critiques go beyond how assimilation was bad for the individual Jews themselves, and magnify the blame to include the tragedies of subsequent German history. Since Scholem’s time a passionate retroactive pessimism about assimilation in Germany has become even more pervasive. Some compare the Jewish “love affair” with German culture and society to an “abusive marriage.”⁴⁰ Then there are those who blame assimilation for helping make the Third Reich possible. A recent book on the theme argues that “the unrequited love affair of Germany’s Jews with their native country *led* to the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust.”⁴¹

Daniel Goldhagen’s controversial 1996 book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, has popularized this pessimistic stance toward assimilation. Overtly he blames Christian Germans for the tragedy of the Holocaust, but he is also blaming Jewish Germans. Goldhagen argues that the Nazi era evolved as it did because eliminationist antisemitism was uniquely strong in Germany, going all the way back to the era I focus on in this book.⁴² The message is clear that the Jews above all should have known that it was an error to even attempt to assimilate into such a society. Goldhagen’s deterministic pessimism about how hardwired antisemitism was in the German past has led to his being labeled *Zionist* by some of his critics.⁴³

This repudiation of assimilation is also visible in contemporary Jewish life.

Although statistically Jews continue to disappear through skyrocketing rates of intermarriage, we also see a vibrant renewal of Jewish religious practice and high culture. A flood of films, books, songs, museums, study groups, and magazines make it clear that contemporary Jews no longer base their identity only on the state of Israel and the Holocaust. So much positive investment in Judaism is of course a dramatic reversal from the immediate past, when Jews were rounded up and murdered in the millions, and many were ashamed of their Jewish noses, their Jewish names, their Jewish hair. Those who celebrate ethnicity today might well disdain the dead converts in this book, and blame them for hypocrisy or even for self-hatred.⁴⁴ Such easy judgments are tempting. But here I aim to make pat judgments more difficult. In these pages we meet the converts and explore the external pressures they faced, as well as their own inner desires. Perhaps after doing so we can understand why they decided to leave Judaism.

None of us alive today can easily presume to know what Jews in nineteenth-century Germany should have done. Still, we wonder. And to wonder at a high level we crave details, details about individual experiences, about the climate of opinion, about institutional decisions. We cannot put ourselves in the place of people caught in a past difficulty unless we can imagine their temptations, their principles, their family relationships, their ambitions, and their fears. I have written this book to give myself those details, and to share them with my readers. Only then can we make up our own minds about assimilation in the German Jewish past, especially about why so many chose to become Christians. We ponder whether a conversion without spiritual motives could ever be an honorable way to achieve emancipation, felt to be honorable from the inside and seen by others as honorable on the outside. The aim here is to see the choices made in the early nineteenth century in the terms that contemporaries saw them.

Still, at the end of the day it would be naïve to pretend that we can easily leave the modern era behind and bury ourselves in the nineteenth century. Our vantage point is unavoidably that of over a half century after World War II ended. And for better or worse the entire experience of the Holocaust has led many to question assimilation, however successful that assimilation might have seemed to the participants at the time. Thus, however passionately the characters in this book recommend assimilating, the contemporary critics of assimilation will always be a chorus that we hear, sometimes loudly, and sometimes in the distance.

The Era of Religious Conversion, 1645–1770

Arriving with Their Chandeliers, 1671

We can justly surmise that the rationale for beginning the black notebooks with the year 1645 was to bring the roots investigation of applicants for higher-level Nazi posts back that far into the past. The choice of that year shows that the genealogy officials were not attending to the landmark dates in the Jewish historical narrative, or they would have begun their records in 1671, not in 1645. In Jewish time, the key date was May 21, 1671, when the ruler of the ambitious state of Prussia invited two large Jewish clans threatened with expulsion from Vienna to move to his capital city, Berlin. On that momentous day, a policy of keeping Jews out of Berlin that had been in place for almost a century was reversed. In this chapter we return to the seventeenth century, to illuminate the conflicts then faced by Jews, and we learn why a tiny trickle of mainly poor Jews converted to become Lutherans in that era.

To understand the significance of the 1671 invitation, we must look at the catastrophic episode of the Jews' earlier expulsion, which took place a century before. The sorry tale began with an accusation against Berlin's leading Court Jew, Yom Tov ben Yehuda Ha-Cohen, who was called Lippold by his Christian contemporaries. "Court Jew" was the contemporary label for a Jewish