Post-Revolutionary Europe, 1815–1856

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9 The Jews: The Dilemmas of Emancipation

Introduction: the Mortara Affair, 1858

The Mortara family ran a grocery store in the small Jewish community of the city of Bologna, then part of the Papal States. Their son, Edgardo, was only 6 years old when, one summer evening in June 1858, Papal troops came to their house to remove him from his distraught parents. The Inquisition had been informed that Edgardo had been secretly baptized in his infancy by a former Catholic servant of the family, a young girl aged 14 at the time. Having been baptized as a Christian, however informally, Edgardo could not be brought up in a Jewish family. He was to be re-educated in a Catholic seminary under the protective eyes of his new foster-parent, His Holiness Pope Pius IX. The Mortaras, desperate to recover their son, mobilized Jewish support in Italy and internationally. Even Sir Moses Montefiore travelled to Rome, as President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and a roving ambassador for Jewish causes, but the Pope declined to see him. All protests were in vain. Pius IX obstinately refused to compromise. Edgardo had become one of the ‘stolen children’ of the era of so-called Jewish emancipation.1

That process of emancipation, whose origins are indelibly associated with the French Revolution, is one theme of this chapter. Liberals saw Jewish liberation as part of a common struggle for the emancipation of humanity, embracing the freedom of black slaves, oppressed Greeks and all other struggling peoples. The story of Edgardo Mortara, however, illustrates that the great liberal cause of Jewish emancipation faced many obstacles, even in Western Europe. Emancipation was not a continuous, linear process. It proceeded by fits and starts, and it sometimes went into reverse. After 1815, for example, in some parts of Italy and Germany, there was a ‘re-ghettoization’ of Jews after the defeat of the French.

The emancipation process must also be considered from a Jewish perspective. It provided unprecedented social and economic opportunities for Jews, but at the same time it posed unprecedented problems. Cultural integration was an attractive option for many, but it was achieved at a cost, namely the loss of their separate identity as Jews. Traditionalists rejected integration altogether, and saw freedom as the ‘poisoned gift’ of European liberalism, designed to draw Jews away from their cultural roots. The responses of Western European Jews to these new dilemmas will be examined.

Historians have often located the birth of modern antisemitism in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this period, the growing forces of nationalism, combined with new theories about race and racial inequality, created new forms of racist xenophobia. The Jews, like other races, became identified by inherent biological and psychological characteristics which a religious conversion could no longer eradicate. But the motives for the abduction of Edgardo Mortara had little to do with such racial conceptions. The problem for the Inquisition was not Edgardo’s race but his religion, and this is why he was redeemable. Historians of modernity too often underestimate the virulence and persistence of this archaic, religion-based Jew-hatred. For Catholics and other Christians, the Jews were always the people of the decider. They were condemned as depraved, bigoted and unwilling to be a part of normal society, but above all they were seen as the killers of Christ.

Edgardo Mortara had to be rescued from them. By the Pope’s standards his abduction and rehabilitation were successful. As a teenager Edgardo renounced his parents, and was then ordained as a priest. He lived an exemplary Catholic life until his death in 1940. The unification of Italy in 1860 had brought the activities of the Papal Inquisition to an end. The Mortara family, supported by money from the Rothschild family, had long since decamped to the more favourable climate of Turin. The scandal which had galvanized liberal Europe in 1858 had by then been long forgotten. It reminded Catholics too much of embarrassing survivals of medieval intolerance; it reminded Jews uncomfortably of the ease with which many of them had abandoned their cultural and religious roots.

Before emancipation

The Jews formed the most significant religious minority in European society. Their story is closely linked to some of the most important historical developments of the century. The rise of modern nationalism made Jews its victims; at the same time they were important agents in the growth of modern capitalism; and Jews were major beneficiaries in the formation of liberal societies. In 1815, however, Jews in many parts of Europe were still subject to legal restrictions inherited from medieval times.

In many European cities, the Jews were still confined to ghettos. After curfew hour, the gates of the ghetto would be locked, and no Christian
could enter nor could any Jew leave without special permission. In addition, Jews had to remain confined in the daytime on Christian religious festivals. Conditions of life in many ghettos were squalid as a result of overcrowding and poor sanitation. In Old Regime Frankfurt, Jews were banned from coffee-houses and public parks, and they were permitted to visit the markets only at fixed times. Like Jews in many cities, they needed a passport to leave town. Jews’ mobility was restricted, and from time to time they might be expelled from Christian society, as the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal soon afterwards (as a consequence the Iberian peninsula is not considered in this chapter). Jews were subject to special taxes. They had few or no civil rights. They were not permitted to own land, or to belong to a guild. They were excluded from positions in government service, from the professions and from military service. They were thus neither peasants nor burghers: they were a people apart, with no place in the social order. The ghetto gates encouraged a feeling of separateness within Jewish communities themselves. A Jewish community under the Old Regime enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, with its own rabbinical court, its administrative council (kahal), links to a rabbinical seminary (yeshivah) and its own language, which in Eastern and Central Europe was predominantly Yiddish, a Jewish dialect of German.

The vast majority of European Jews, contrary to a growing myth, were desperately poor. Before emancipation and right through the nineteenth century, most Jews eked out a living as peddlers, small dealers or sellers of second-hand clothing. Others were cattle or horse-dealers, and in this role a few were sometimes able to make substantial profits out of supplying the European armies in time of war. In Eastern Europe Jews might be innkeepers, distillers of alcohol or rent-collectors. The traditional Christian prejudice against usury (lending money at excessive rates of interest) had given Jews an opening as money-lenders. In some parts of rural Europe, before the age of modern banking, Jews thus held a high proportion of peasant mortgages. This made them vulnerable to outbreaks of antisemitic violence and to accusations of parasitism.

These broad generalizations disguise a multitude of geographical and cultural variations. European Jews lived under different legal regimes, which evolved as European societies themselves evolved. Jewry was never completely culturally homogeneous. The Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish and had their own religious practices. Meanwhile the Sephardic Jews, who originated from Spain, Portugal and North Africa, had their own synagogues and liturgy, and spoke a different language, Ladino, although this was dying by the nineteenth century. The emancipation process was to lead to further social and cultural differentiation amongst European Jews. In particular, the non-emancipated Jews of Eastern Europe remained closest to traditional cultural practices, traditional dress, the dietary laws and religious observance. In the emancipated West, Jews were to become more secular and to adopt cultural behaviour common to all Western European society.

The process of emancipation in Western Europe

Emancipation refers here to the liberation of Jews from all forms of discriminatory laws, prohibitions and taxes which restricted their social, economic and political opportunities as a group. It meant the acquisition of equal status, in social and political terms, with the rest of society. Emancipation was to produce enormous transformations in Jewish society and culture, but it emanated from arguments in Gentile society which Jews themselves were powerless to influence. Emancipation originated first in the Austrian Emperor Joseph II’s Toleration Edict of 1782, which was a limited emancipation aimed at strengthening the power and resources of the rational absolutist state. Jews henceforth enjoyed greater geographical mobility. They were subjected to military service for the first time. The special taxes paid by Jews remained: the state could not afford to abolish them. This partial liberation was taken much further by the sweeping emancipation granted in the French Revolution, couched in a new language of abstract rights and individual freedoms. Both these measures were based on a very negative perception of Jewry and a desire to bring all sections of society within the authority of the state.

In 1791, the French National Constituent Assembly granted full citizenship to all French Jews. The Jews were accorded individual rights and at the same time they lost their autonomy as a separate community. The assimilationist agenda of the French Revolution was made explicit by the legislator Clermont-Tonnerre in 1789, when he declared: 'As a nation the Jews must be denied everything, as individuals they must be granted everything.' The Jews were seen as backward and parasitical. They needed to be improved or, in the contemporary discourse of emancipation, 'regenerated'. They should be dragged away from money lending and petty trading into more useful activities like agriculture, skilled crafts and commerce. These assumptions were shared by both the supporters of emancipation and their critics. According to the critics, Jews should not be granted legal emancipation until they had ‘improved’ and could show they deserved liberation. For the supporters of emancipation, the introverted fanaticism of the Jews and their parasitical status were the result of centuries of persecution by European
societies. Once the discriminatory legislation was removed, then Jews were confidently expected to assimilate and become full French citizens. This meant that they would gradually cease to be Jews altogether. For the Abbé Grégoire, one of the leading proponents of emancipation, this would merely be the prelude to the conversion of French Jews to Christianity.5

The French Revolution thus aimed to merge Jews completely into Christian society, as individuals enjoying full citizenship rights but no distinct community status. The revolutionary and Napoleonic armies spread these ideas to the rest of Europe. In Napoleonic Italy, the Jews were given civil rights, the ghetto gates were pulled down in Rome and Venice, and Jews were now permitted to live anywhere, buy land and seek employment in the public service. Not surprisingly, Italian Jews became strong supporters of the French administration. French legislation liberated Jews in the Netherlands, in Baden, in Westphalia, Frankfurt and Hamburg. In deference to local pressure, this legislation was not implemented in the Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw. Nevertheless, a seismic shift had occurred in the situation of European Jewry and its relationship with the rest of society. The repercussions were to be felt throughout the following century.

Andrew Canepa has usefully distinguished three models of the emancipation process in Western Europe.5 The first was the British model, in which there was no emancipation edict, but a gradual acquisition of the rights of citizenship by a series of legal rulings. By the nineteenth century, this amounted to almost complete legal equality for British Jews. In the second model, applicable most clearly to France, emancipation was achieved by a single, sweeping edict of liberation. In such a model, the legal details had to be subsequently worked out and they were not always worked out in a manner favourable to Jews. The fundamental issue of Jewish status, however, had been resolved and was no longer a matter for debate. In a third model, most clearly applicable in parts of German-speaking Europe, the Josephan legacy remained very important. In this model, emancipation was a slow and stuttering process in which the debate over Jewish liberation was continuous and the status of Jews remained in question. All three versions of emancipation and combinations of them were to be found in the main states of Western and Central Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The status of Jews in Western and Central Europe

How many Jews lived in Western and Central Europe? Estimates differ, but there were about 360,000 in Prussia, of whom 52,000 were in Posen.

Another quarter of a million lived in Galicia in the Habsburg Empire.6 Vienna became a major Jewish centre only after restrictions on Jewish property ownership in the capital were lifted in 1848. In the 20 years following, the Jewish population of Vienna rose rapidly to 40,000.7 There were 245,000 Jews in Hungary in 1830, and about 75,000 in Bohemia in 1850.8 In Germany as a whole, there were an estimated 600,000 Jews in the middle of the century.9 In France, the small Jewish population of about 40,000 at the time of the Revolution rose to about 86,000 by 1843.10 There were about 40,000 British Jews, more than half of them in London, about the same number in the Netherlands with a similar concentration in Amsterdam, and a smaller Italian Jewish community which numbered about 30,000 in 1800, with the largest numbers in Rome and the port city of Livorno.11

In many Italian states, the discriminatory legislation of the Old Regime was restored after the end of Napoleonic rule. The Papal Inquisition was reestablished. In Piedmont, Modena and the Papal States, Jews were forced back into the ghettos, once again prohibited from buying real estate, and excluded from jobs in government service. In Tuscany, on the other hand, including Livorno, the Jews' civil rights were confirmed, although they were still excluded from military service, and this can be seen as a benchmark of equal status everywhere. Similar regimes prevailed (as far as the Jews were concerned) in Parma and the Austrian provinces of Lombardy and Venetia. The Risorgimento liberals argued for Jewish emancipation. For Mazzini or D'Azzeglio, a new Italy signified justice for all, even the Jews.12 All the same, liberals envisaged emancipation as the first step towards total integration and the eventual conversion of Italian Jews to Catholicism. Piedmont was to take the lead in 1848, when King Carlo Alberto's Constitution (the Statuto) emancipated the Jews of Piedmont and even made them subject to conscription. This act resembled Canepa's second model of emancipation relying on an all-embracing government edict. Henceforth, the expansion of Piedmont in the Italian peninsula would bring Jewish emancipation in its wake. Italy's small and long-established Jewish population became one of the most assimilated in Western Europe.

In Germany, the Congress of Vienna left the issue of Jewish liberation to the decisions of individual German states. This meant that they were free to overthrow French legislation. The Jewish communities of Frankfurt and Hamburg were deprived of the rights accorded by French imperial rule. The cities of Bremen and Lübeck expelled the Jewish merchants who had settled there in the Napoleonic period. Throughout Germany, emancipation was slow and partial. In Prussia, legislation was introduced in 1812 to remove special taxes on Jews, to abolish rabbinical courts and to subject
Jews to military service. But employment in the public service was not yet open to them, and in 1818 the Prussian government excluded Jews from academic posts. In the Rhineland, Karl Marx’s father Heinrich, descended from a family of rabbis, converted to Lutheranism after the French departed in order to keep practising law. Prussia had acquired the substantial Jewish population of Posen in the Polish Partitions of 1772, 1775 and 1795, and the Rhineland Jews became Prussian only after 1815, so that there was little uniformity of legislation in the various provinces of post-1815 Prussia. In Posen, where most Prussian Jews lived, licensing restrictions tried to limit Jewish involvement in innkeeping and the sale of alcohol. Jewish dealers were accused of corrupting the peasantry and competing unfairly with Christian traders. A special law of 1833 enabled Posen Jews to become naturalized, and by 1845, all Jews in Prussia were granted the ‘privilege’ of being drafted into the Prussian army.

Restrictions on civil rights and on Jewish mobility remained in force in southern Germany and in the Habsburg Empire. In Vienna itself, Jews could not buy property: Salomon Rothschild had to rent a town house there until 1842. In Bohemia, Czech Jews were allowed to own land in 1841, and residence restrictions were lifted in 1848. The Revolutions of 1848 produced contradictory results as far as Jews were concerned. German liberals accepted the need for Jewish emancipation, but they still hoped for Jewish assimilation into a new national polity. Anti-Jewish rhetoric of a very ancient kind was still heard even in progressive circles. The Young Hegelian Arnold Ruge, for example, called Jews ‘maggots in the cheese of Christianity’. What was new in 1848 was talk of equality, toleration and the rights and duties of the Jew as a citizen, reflecting the progress of liberal concepts over the previous half-century. The granting of full emancipation by the Frankfurt National Assembly was an important milestone, but its implementation was always dependent on individual states. Moreover, the economic depression produced anti-Jewish disturbances in Baden, Hesse and Silesia. The failures of the 1848 Revolutions effectively postponed full Jewish emancipation in Germany for another generation, while legal disabilities were not fully removed for all Austrian Jews until 1867. The Bohemian Jews, whose relationship with Czech nationalism had always been problematic, now retreated into the German cultural sphere. In the Habsburg Empire, Canepa’s third model of emancipation seems most appropriate: Jews attended German-speaking state schools on the Josephan model, but their full emancipation was a very piecemeal affair.

The situation of British Jews was quite different, as Canepa stressed. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews born in Britain became British citizens, with civil and political rights and the right to own land. The discriminatory legislation encountered in Germany and parts of Italy no longer existed there. Unlike thousands of their counterparts on the continent, British Jews had become very urbanized and involved in skilled crafts as well as commercial life. The process of anglicization was gradual but effective, particularly amongst rich Sephardic families like that of future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. Poorer Ashkenazi immigrants from Holland or Poland integrated much more slowly, but a wealthy Jewish bourgeoisie elite emerged.

There were still a few bastions of the English establishment which excluded Jews, like parliament and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, but one by one they were conquered. In 1833, Francis Henry Goldsmith became the first Jew to be admitted to the Bar in Britain when he was exempted from the Christian oath of office. Further breakthroughs followed. In 1845, Jews were permitted to become London aldermen and, in 1846, Moses Montefiore was knighted and made a baronet. The most celebrated struggle of all, however, was that engaged by Lionel Rothschild for admission to the House of Commons. Rothschild was elected to parliament in 1847 as a Liberal member for the City of London, but was barred from sitting when he refused the Christian oath and insisted on affirming his allegiance on the Old Testament. He was only admitted to parliament in 1858, after being defiantly elected in his City constituency on four consecutive occasions. Only the opulent upper-crust of British Jewry could aspire to such achievements, but they stood as role models of social success for poor Jews everywhere.

In France, there were four quite separate Jewish communities. About 12 per cent of all French Jews in 1815 lived in and around Avignon. A long-standing Sephardic community lived in the southwest, principally in Bordeaux and Bayonne. A small but growing number were based in Paris. By far the largest group of French Jews, however, was the much poorer community of Alsace in eastern France, where three-quarters of French Jews lived in 1815. This Yiddish-speaking community was the target of regular complaints about Jewish financial activities. Perhaps one-third of all mortgage loans in Alsace were in Jewish hands.

Napoleon’s so-called Infamous Decree (Décret Infini) of 1808 imposed new restrictions on Jewish trade and money-lending for a period of ten years. This was a temporary setback in the emancipation process, but in 1818, when the Infamous Decree came up for renewal, the Bourbon regime let it lapse. In 1830, the French state also agreed to cover Jewish religious expenses. Jews entered politics and the professions, and were drawn increasingly to Paris. They became prominent financial entrepreneurs, like
the Pèreires. After the Revolution of February 1848, two Jews, Crémieux
and Goudchaux, became members of the Provisional Government. Among
conservatives, republicans and socialists, Jews played important roles in
French society.

Jews in Eastern Europe

The vast majority of European Jews, about 2 million of them, lived in west-
ern Russia and the Congress Kingdom of Poland. Here, in David Vital’s
phrase, lay the ‘true centre of gravity of European Jewry’. Until the great
wave of transatlantic migration developed in the final decades of the nine-
teenth century, this region was the dynamic and traditional heart of world
Jewry.

In Western Europe, Jewish emancipation was a sequel to the decline of
feudal society and the access of the liberal bourgeoisie to social and politi-
cal rights. In Eastern Europe, feudalism had not disappeared, the urban
bourgeoisie was small and weak and the conditions which had produced
emancipation in the West did not exist. The legal status of Polish Jews
under Prussian or Habsburg rule slowly improved, but in Tsarist Russia no
emancipation occurred. On the contrary, the Jews of Russia suffered a
brutal and harrowing repression.

In Congress Poland, Tsar Alexander was prepared to grant the Jews
certain rights, such as exemption from conscription, but only if they
converted to Christianity. Any moves he might make were opposed by
Czartoryski and the Polish aristocracy, who argued like their counterparts in
the West that the Jews must reform themselves if they were ever to deserve
freedom. Most Polish Jews were desperately poor and paid exorbitant
special taxes. They could not own land which was an aristocratic monopoly.
Yet a few urban Jews played a significant role in economic life. In Warsaw,
they were vital to international commerce, acting as intermediaries in the
grain export business. They handled mortgages and army supply contracts,
and took leases on the collection of government duties on salt and tobacco.
In the Polish capital this Jewish entrepreneurial elite was indispensable,
and individual members of it were rewarded with special concessions to buy
property outside the Jewish district. Prosperous Jews sent their sons to
university in Warsaw or Cracow, joined Masonic Lodges and participated in
Polish intellectual life. Many crafts and professions were still barred to them,
and they did not enjoy full citizenship rights. This did not prevent Warsaw
becoming as much of a magnet for Polish Jews as Paris was for French
Jewry. By 1846, over a quarter of the population of Warsaw was Jewish.

Beyond bourgeois society in Warsaw, any idea of Polish–Jewish solidar-
ity was wishful thinking. In the Polish Revolution of 1830, most poor Jews
did not support the Polish landowners and army officers who led the move-
ment. Polish nationalism had as little to offer the majority of Jews as did the
Russian Tsar. In fact Poles executed many Jews who were suspected of
assisting the Russian enemy in 1830, and the revolutionary situation
allowed the free expression of popular hostility towards Jews. Only on the
left-wing of socialism, in Marxist internationalist circles, would Poles and
Jews eventually find some common ground.

In the East, the Partitions of Poland had greatly extended Russian territ-
ory, but left the Tsars with a new problem — about 400 000 Jews lived
there, and this population had to be absorbed by a regime with an appalling
reputation for brutality and intolerance. Furthermore, the Jewish popula-
tion was expanding faster than the Christian population. Catherine the
Great had confined Jews to a band of territory in western Russia, stretch-
ing from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Even within this ‘Pale of Settlement’,
Jews needed special permission to live in certain cities like Kiev. More than
4000 Jews lived in the port city of Odessa, where they managed the grain
trade in conjunction with Greek merchants. In spite of enjoying govern-
ment protection, the Odessa Jews suffered pogroms in 1821, 1849, 1859
and 1871. Most Jews lived in small villages (shtetl), but they were periodi-
cally expelled and forced into the cities. In 1824, thousands of Jews were
driven from their villages in Mogilev and Vitebsk provinces. In 1827, they
were expelled from Grodno and even from Kiev itself, although this last
expulsion was never completed. The Jewish presence was seen as a
Corrupting influence and a threat to Russian peasant values. Jews were also
excluded from merchant guilds and prohibited from employing Christian
servants.

The paternalistic, religiously inspired dictatorship of Alexander I gave
way to outright military coercion under his successor, Tsar Nicholas I.
Nicholas used the army to pursue a policy of punitive assimilation. His edict
of 1827 authorizing the conscription of Jewish boys of 12 years old and even
younger was particularly barbarous. The quotas of young recruits were to be
provided by the kahal (Jewish governing council) itself, and they were
subject to 25 years of military service. If these recruits survived, they were
unlikely to return to their villages and in effect were subjected to an ordeal of
enforced de-Judaization. In barracks, they were beaten and starved until
they submitted to Christian baptism.

The policy of Russification dictated the assimilation of the Jews into the
dominant Russian culture of the multi-ethnic Tsarist Empire. Between
1840 and 1855, a state campaign was launched to break down Jewish
autonomy and cultural independence. In 1844, the kahal was abolished, and the taxes it collected were diverted to finance the government's educational schemes for Jews. While Jewish schools were brought under government control, secular schools were to be established to facilitate the process of integration. Tsar Nicholas's minister Uvarov tried to enlist enlightened Jews in his education project. Influenced by the Berlin Enlightenment, they welcomed the secular curriculum introduced in Odessa and Vilna, where Jews could be taught foreign languages, mathematics, science and other aspects of general European culture for the first time. This programme appealed to members of the Jewish intelligentsia who regarded the Yiddish-speakers of the shetl as backward and narrow-minded. The power of traditional belief worked against Uvarov's experiment: in 1855, only 2500 students were attending his state schools for Jews.23

Eastern European Jews thus preserved their tradition and religious culture far longer than their counterparts in the West. Compared to Western Jews, they rarely converted to Christianity. Their rates of fertility and illiteracy were higher than in the West. At the same time, their poverty and relative isolation were also undiminished. Eastern European Jews generally knew as little of Christian society as it knew of them. They inhabited a highly segregated world. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Jewish migration from Tsarist Russia was a migration of traditionally orthodox Jews to a secularized West. A very different Jewish exodus was to occur after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Russian Jews emigrated from a secularized Communist society. Then, it might even be said, they left Russia to find out what being Jewish meant.

**Jewish assimilation and Jewish identity**

How did Jews respond to the new opportunities for social mobility which opened up for them? In Western Europe, several choices were open. Some wholeheartedly embraced the goal of 'assimilation', defined here as abandoning Judaism and Jewish cultural roots, to achieve a complete merger with the rest of Western European society. This kind of assimilation, which implied a complete loss of Jewish identity, was what the original defenders of emancipation had hoped for. Other Jews achieved a level of 'acculturation' which fell short of full assimilation: in other words, they adopted the habits and tastes of European secular culture, without completely ceasing to identify themselves as Jews. This group perhaps experienced the most acute identity problems in the wake of emancipation. A third group of traditional Jews rejected assimilation, and attempted to preserve their cultural and
above all religious distinctiveness. For them, merging with Christian society was tantamount to apostasy and betrayal.

The use of Hebrew, and the decline or persistence of the Yiddish language were important indicators of Jewish acculturation in Western Europe. Legislation in France, Prussia and the Habsburg Empire expressly prohibited the use of Hebrew in business transactions. The example of eastern France suggests that tradition died hard. Here acculturation was a very slow process, and the use of Alsatian Yiddish was common throughout this period. In the 1820s and 1830s, about one-half of Jewish brides in the villages of Alsace still signed their marriage certificates using Hebrew characters.\(^{24}\) In the countryside, relatively few Jewish children were sent to public primary schools, and boys were still given distinctively Jewish names.

There were proposals in France and Germany to alter forms of worship in order to bring them more in line with dominant Christian practices. Some argued for the admission of women into the main part of the synagogue. Integrated Jews called for greater decorum and reverence during worship, instead of the common practice of conducting private conversations in the middle of religious ceremonies. There were proposals to imitate Christian worship by introducing an organ into synagogues, as well as recurrent suggestions to move the Jewish sabbath to Sunday. These reforms were condemned by the orthodox rabbis. The Bible and classic Jewish literature were subjected to critical modern scholarship by intellectuals like those in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (Jewish Learning) movement. A Jewish elite accepted the need to ‘regenerate’ the Jews, to modify the nature and religious practices of Judaism in order to fulfil their role as modern citizens. Social and cultural transformations worked fastest amongst the expanding Jewish urban bourgeoisie; the poorer Jews continued to use Hebrew and observe the dietary laws.

Bourgeois Jews joined the social world which their Christian counterparts frequented. Jewish entrepreneurs and bankers like Pèreire were active in the Saint-Simonian movement. They became Freemasons, like Adolphe Crémieux, Sovereign Grand Master of the Scottish Rite in France in 1869, whose children converted to Catholicism. Such conversions were another indicator of the desire for acceptance and assimilation. Conversion was a path to social advancement for ambitious professionals. Karl Marx, born in 1818, was not circumcised and was baptized a Lutheran (in Germany converted Jews tended to become Protestants rather than Catholics).\(^{25}\)

These processes posed dilemmas about the nature of Jewish identity. How far were attending state schools, adopting Christian names and vernacular languages compatible with true Judaism? Jews shared a traditional prayer for their return to Israel, but were they not now British, French or Prussian citizens? What remained of a Jewish identity in the rapidly secularizing world of Western Europe? One aspect of Jewishness, at least, hardly changed: Jews everywhere largely practised endogamous marriage. In other words, Jews still tended to marry Jews. In the West, Jewish families became smaller, as Jews gradually adopted common bourgeois practices of family limitation, but their families generally remained foyers of Jewish solidarity. Even amongst the Jewish elite who converted to Christianity or became completely secularized, a sense of Jewish identity was rarely lost altogether. Jews had gained legal equality but not necessarily jettisoned all their communal traditions. Thus Adolphe Crémieux was an acculturated French lawyer and politician, a non-practising Jew who became a minister in the Provisional Government of 1848, and yet he championed Jewish causes all over Europe. As acculturated Jews became active in European society, they risked a double estrangement, both from their Jewish traditions, and ultimately from the bourgeois world to which they so much desired to belong. Secularized Jews could never go back to the old religion, but sometimes in spite of themselves, their Jewishness clung to them like a shadow. Benjamin Disraeli was a converted Jew who embraced these dilemmas with defiance and spectacular success. Always distrusted by the British upper classes as a Jew, a novelist and flamboyant dilettante, he became leader of the Conservative Party and the first British prime minister of Jewish origin. Disraeli celebrated British imperialism on one hand, and his Jewishness on the other, openly befriend the Rothschilds and basing some of his fictional characters on them. Even the most apparently assimilated Jews could take pride in some aspects of their Jewish identity.

British society was, as Todd Endelman argues, a paradigm of ‘radical assimilation’.\(^{26}\) Here the well-established Sephardic community, from which the Disraeli family came, were the first to acculturate to British life. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, all British Jews were subject to similar pressures for what French commentators called ‘fusion sociale’. British Jewry, largely composed of immigrant Jews, had no strong communal structure to parallel Napoleon’s system of Consistories in France, and had no dynamic intellectual leadership. Without the tradition of discriminating legislation which still existed in parts of continental Europe, conditions in Britain favoured Jewish assimilation.

The case of the Rothschilds

The Rothschilds were an exceptional family by anyone’s standards. Role models for socially mobile Jews, they were later targeted by both the Left
and the Right as representative of all the evils of financial capitalism. Their massive wealth and success made them quite untypical of the mass of poor European Jews. Yet their story, superbly told by the financial historian Niall Ferguson, illustrates several of the themes of this chapter: they faced both the opportunities of emancipation and the problems of assimilation; and their fate was intertwined with the development of industrial and financial capitalism in the post-revolutionary era. "Money is the god of our time, and Rothschild is his prophet", wrote the German (and Jewish) poet Heinrich Heine in 1841.27

Mayer Amschel Rothschild left the Frankfurt ghetto after 1811, when the French emancipated the Frankfurt Jews. He bought his first house nearby, and celebrated his escape from the claustrophobic world of the Judengasse by sleeping under the stars in his new garden. Mayer Amschel had been a 'court Jew' who had helped to manage the substantial investments of the Elector of Hesse-Cassel, accumulated from the profits of hiring mercenary soldiers to the European powers.

The peace of 1815 froze the emancipation process, but Mayer Amschel had already begun to make plans for his sons. His son Nathan had been sent to Manchester as a textile dealer, but Napoleon's exclusion of British exports from Europe turned him into a London banker. Nathan's experience in smuggling textile goods to the continent stood him in good stead—during the Peninsular War, he was able to supply the Duke of Wellington with the bullion he needed to finance his army, in shipments code-named 'Rabbi Mosche'. Using his family connections, Nathan organized the payment of British subsidies to her continental allies in the struggle against Napoleonic France, learning the skills of 'arbitrage', that is, profiting from fluctuations in the exchange rate as he dealt in different European currencies.

A multinational fraternity of Rothschilds was established after 1815 to make use of the fortune and the connections thus acquired from financing the Napoleonic Wars. Nathan's brothers James in Paris, Amschel in Frankfurt, Salomon in Vienna and eventually Carl in Naples formed a unique network, enabling the group to raise money for governments almost anywhere in Europe. If one branch suffered a loss, the other centres would absorb it, just as long as losses were not universal which was precisely what happened in the general crash of 1846–7. The Rothschilds were personal bankers for Wellington, Metternich and the British royal family. They raised loans for the Austrian government in 1820 and for Russia in 1822. They financed the French war in Spain in 1823. They raised sterling loans for the Prussian government: this was the first occasion when British investors bought foreign government bonds and it marks the genesis of the international bond market. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the combined capital of the Rothschilds vastly exceeded that of any other international bank. In the 1830s and 1840s, the bank diversified, as James Rothschild invested in railway building, taking a controlling interest in the new Chemin de Fer du Nord. Meanwhile Salomon invested in the new Austrian Lloyd steamship company, established in 1835. They had become not just bankers but industrial investors. Their only mistake, according to Ferguson, was not to establish a firm foothold in the United States.

The Rothschilds' support for Metternich and his Prussian allies led Heinrich Heine among others to see them as agents of reaction, the paymasters of post-revolutionary conservatism. There was nevertheless something subversive about their new role, which potentially undermined the old landed aristocracy who needed their resources and their credit. While serving, and sometimes aping the social elites of Europe, the Rothschilds represented a different ethos, the ethos of new money which did not respect the old. The Rothschilds often appalled aristocratic society by talking about money as if it mattered.28

The Rothschilds craved acceptance and social recognition, as the struggle of Lionel Rothschild, Nathan's son, to enter the House of Commons illustrated. They changed their names, Jakob becoming James and Kalman Carl. They bought suburban villas and town houses, the status symbols of the European aristocracy. Nathan acquired Gunnersbury Park, James his French chateaux and Carl the Villa Pignatelli near Naples. They acquired all the accoutrements of a French or English gentleman—the coat of arms, the racehorses, the hunting stable. They bought Rembrandts and Gainsboroughs, they hired Mendelssohn and Liszt to play at their soirées. In many ways they became part of the European social elite. They gradually abandoned sabbath observance, finding it impossible to neglect their business correspondence on a Saturday.

Yet in spite of this meteoric acculturation, the Rothschilds remained Jews. Unlike many contemporaries, they never converted to Christianity. As Carl said in 1814: 'I am a Jew in the depths of my heart, I prefer not to mix with the meshumei (converted) families.' They often used their money to assist Jewish charities. In the early years of their rise to riches, the brothers corresponded with each other in Judendeutsch—a form of German written in Hebrew characters— which worked as a secret code. In Frankfurt, Amschel observed the sabbath and ate kosher; he even built a synagogue in his own house. Like so many other Jews, the Rothschilds married only Jews. In fact, they only married other Rothschild cousins, taking the same kind of genetic risk run by the inbred royalty of Europe. The exception only went to prove this rule of strict Jewish endogamy.
Jew-hatred traditional and modern

There were other limits to Jewish assimilation, in the form of popular prejudices and hostility to Jews in general. To some extent, Jew-hatred in this period was fuelled by an emerging nationalism. In Bohemia, for example, Czech nationalists saw the Jews as vehicles of German culture and therefore the natural lackeys of the Austrian regime. The youthful nationalists who formed the Buschenschäften (student guilds) in German universities like Jena excluded Jews and saw them as a group outside the national community, and a danger to its health and vigour. Herder, the eighteenth-century philosopher who inspired interest in a national popular culture, had written: 'The Jewish race is and remains in Europe an Asiatic people alien to our region.' Hostility towards Jews remained an integral part of the nationalist aspirations of student youth in Germany.

This form of antagonism towards Jews should not, however, be exaggerated. Most often outbreaks of violence against Jews had more ancient origins. In times of hardship, peasants would react against the Jews who often held their mortgages and controlled interest rates. These fears lay behind the anti-Jewish riots in Alsace during the 1848 Revolution, and they were essentially a response to a medieval situation which had left the Jews as the main source of credit for local peasants. In the so-called 'Hep-Hep' riots which swept through many German cities in 1819, the underlying cause was not so much emerging German nationalism as the economic upheavals and shortages of the difficult postwar years. Jewish homes and stores were attacked and synagogues destroyed.

Hatred of Jews, as the Mortara Affair suggested, was not yet racially inspired. It most often had archaic and Christian roots. This was clear in cases of the 'blood libel' – the myth according to which Jews would murder Christian children to extract their blood to make Passover bread. Examples of the blood libel surfaced often in Eastern Europe, like the cases in Saratov (1851) and Velizh (1823–6). A child would die or disappear, a community would turn on the Jews, violence or imprisonment would follow, then the authorities would make more or less serious efforts to restore order and let justice run its course. In Velizh, the government closed all synagogues for nine years after a ritual murder accusation against Jews.

There was certainly a literary Jew-hatred, too, exemplified by Dickens’s manipulative and criminal Fagin in Oliver Twist, and the sinister financier Lucingen, who made several fictional appearances in Balzac's Comédie Humaine, ridiculed for his thick German accent and reminiscent of the Rothschilds. The conventional nineteenth-century view identified Jews as the epitome of commercial greed. They were the unacceptable face of emerging capitalism. In this role, they were attacked not only by Christian traditionalists, but also by elements on the socialist left. Toussenel made an impact in 1846 with his book The Jews, Kings of the Epoch: A History of Financial Feudalism which concluded that emancipation had been a mistake and cast the Jews as agents of capitalist oppression. This work resonated because its publication coincided with the bursting of the bubble in railway shares in which James Rothschild had been heavily involved. What is more, a horrid derailment on his northern railway in that same year caused 14 deaths and provoked vigorous denunciations in the press. Jew-hatred was thus many-sided: it had Christian roots, an economic context, and undertones both nationalist and socialist. The racial theories of modern anti-Semitism were later to build on these older prejudices.

Conclusion

The process of Jewish emancipation was neither smooth nor uninterrupted nor uncontested. It nevertheless went hand in hand with the development of political liberalism and capitalism. An elite of well-integrated Jews appeared at the forefront of these modernizing forces. Yet the majority of their fellow Jews remained poor shopkeepers and dealers in second-hand goods.

Emancipation caused world Jewry to become more fragmented and heterogeneous both socially and culturally. As well as the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, there were now increasing gaps within Jewry between rich and poor, the acculturated and the traditionalist, the orthodox and the liberal (or 'reformed') and above all between East
and West. The promise of full citizenship and assimilation seemed to bring about the unprecedented disintegration of the Jews.

This would however be a superficial conclusion. Predictions that Jews, once liberated, would lose their Jewishness and become indistinguishable from the rest of society were not fulfilled. Even the most acculturated Western Jews preserved a sense of their Jewish identity. Adolphe Crémieux, Nathan Rothschild and Benjamin Disraeli never ceased to be Jews, even when they or their children converted to Christianity. In any case, society would never let them forget their origins even if they had wanted to. Among these well-integrated elite circles, a modern and secular notion of Jewish identity developed.

The setbacks noted in this chapter certainly contributed to the formation of a renewed Jewish consciousness. For emancipated Jews who had achieved success and social promotion, incidents like the Mortara Affair, with which this chapter opened, sent out a wake-up call. Isidore Cahen sounded the alert for all Western Jews in these words: ‘The Mortara Affair reveals, strips bare, the ultramontanist tendencies [i.e. tendencies to strengthen the power of the Pope]; it shows you the extent to which you may be afraid; let it be an alarm signal for you’. 34

European Jewry needed to defend its collective interests, and it now had the platform and the resources to do so. In 1860, in the aftermath of the Mortara Affair, the first world organization of Jews, the Universal Jewish Alliance (Alliance Israélite Universelle), was established in Paris. It was a sign that a new sense of Jewish solidarity was developing. Paradoxically, this emerging pan-Jewish consciousness was articulated in Paris, the home of the French Revolution, where emancipation had been expected to erode Jewish separateness and lead to a new ‘social fusion’ of Jews and Christians. It seemed that at the very heart of liberated Western Jewry, a distinctive Jewish identity was alive and strong. The hopes of the emancipationists had not been fulfilled.

10 The City

Introduction: what made Dostoevsky nervous

Eighteenth-century intellectuals saw the city as the snake-pit of debauchery and a trap for the unwary. It was a place where money ruled, where innocent peasant girls were seduced by worldly predators and so-called ‘sophistication’ had become an excuse for immoral behaviour. In the early nineteenth century, the material problems of urban life, such as the need for sewerage and a clean water supply, became more pressing than moral ones. The material and moral environments, however, were linked: a poor environment was unlikely to produce virtuous town-dwellers. As Charles Kingsley declared in a lecture in 1857: ‘The moral state of a city depends – how far I know not, but frightfully, to an extent as yet uncalculated, and perhaps incalculable – on the physical state of that city; on the food, water, air, and lodging of its inhabitants.’ 35 Rapid population growth made problems of poverty and sanitation more urgent. The pre-modern city was still made up of networks of dark, narrow alleys but it grew inexorably larger and the density of its teeming inhabitants more overpowering.

Today many would consider New York as the acme of metropolitan life in the West. Whether it excites or horrifies the visitor, it seems to represent the quintessence of urban civilization. In the late nineteenth century, Paris, with its new boulevards and department stores, seemed the ultimate in modernity. In the early nineteenth century, London played this role as the city which contained within itself the future of all other cities. The Russian novelist Dostoevsky visited London to see the Great Exhibition of 1851, and remarked: ‘You feel nervous . . . a feeling of fear somehow creeps over you. Can this, you think, in fact be the final accomplishment of an ideal state of things? Is this the end, by any chance? 36 This chapter must consider what it was about the city that alienated contemporaries and might have made Dostoevsky nervous. These factors include the sheer size of cities, their problems of poverty and unemployment, of crime and disease. In the 1830s and 1840s, well-to-do elites became increasingly afraid of the urban poor: their unhealthy tenements were the festering ground of lethal epidemics and of social unrest. And in 1848, European cities were hotbeds of revolution.