

# Introduction

In this book I present a variety of examples of how Jews in early modern Germany remembered and narrated the past. Although it has been argued that Jews possessed little in the way of formal historiographical traditions in this period, what follows demonstrates that Jews nevertheless, or precisely because, co-opted the past both consciously and unconsciously for many reasons, and in various and surprising ways. Responding to the particular conditions in which they found themselves in early modern German and Jewish culture, Jews fashioned the past for both internal and external purposes—creating communal identity in contemporary situations, while seeking connections to a broader Jewish past. While Jews related past events to present circumstances in paradigmatic ways that have been seen as traditionally religious, this study reveals that Jews also shaped the past to address both contemporary internal concerns and external relations.

This book engages, but then redirects, important discussions by recent historians regarding the nature of time and the construction and role of memory and history in pre-modern Europe and pre-modern Jewish civilization. I argue that even when they did not write formal “histories,” Jews maintained a significant and lively engagement with the past that operated at various levels and divided the past into generally coherent, if long and at times changeable, units. Some of these units were based on the experiences and perspectives of individual Jews, individual communities, or clusters of communities. Some had basis in actual experiences with the past, while others were related to the lore of particular communities, or the broader religious currents and traditions of Judaism. In the end, however, all of these memories helped to define and shape early modern German Jewry.

The sources examined in this book are diverse. Any form of German Jewish expression in the early modern period that contains reference to the past or past events is open to investigation. This includes, for example, chronicles, liturgical works, books of customs, memorybooks, biblical commentaries, rabbinic responsa literature, and community ledgers. Throughout, a broad comparative basis is offered, particularly through the juxtaposition of early modern Christian engagement with the past.

The period covered here is roughly 1500–1700. These dates were chosen in large part because of the scope of the sources available. There were, however, additional reasons for selecting these parameters. These dates bound important German developments, such as the Reformation, forcing us to consider how more general conditions in Germany impacted the way that Jews engaged the past. But this period also had real meaning for internal Jewish developments, demarcating the boundaries of significant demographic and social shifts within the Jewish communities themselves. Throughout this book the beginning and end dates of investigation are taken rather fluidly, so that late fifteenth- and very early eighteenth-century materials are also examined as they help to clarify developments or trends.

A critical issue has been the selection of the geographical span of this work. One cannot speak of early modern Germany without immediately running into the complex question of just what “Germany” was. Was it defined by linguistic patterns, political territories, cultural inclinations, religious beliefs, or something still different? Even within Germany, political borders might cross traditional ecclesiastical divisions, so that the duchy of Bavaria and the Rhine Palatinate, for example, each lay in seven different dioceses, while the two Saxonies were in eleven.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this research, I have opted to include the broader German Empire, described by Johannes Cochlaeus (1479–1552), the anti-Reformation humanist, in his *Brevis Germaniae descriptio* of 1512: “I believe that no region in Europe extends further than Germany ... It is enclosed in the south by Italy and Dalmatia [Yugoslavia]; in the east by Hungary and Poland; in the north by the Baltic and the North Sea; and in the west by France and the English channel.”<sup>2</sup> While one could devise many different definitions for early modern Germany, it is this broad geographical definition that I have selected to bound the investigation that follows.

I should note that even for early modern Jews, the question of what was “German” could be complicated. On the one hand, many historians have found increasing evidence to suggest that “Ashkenaz” had very distinct boundaries and meanings in the world-view of early modern Jews.<sup>3</sup> Important synods, for example, stipulated the political borders within German Jewry as well as the central location of primary German Jewish courts and tax-collection centers. Restrictions were placed on Jews seeking to take litigation from a particular region, especially crossing over into Italy or Poland. On the other hand, it has become equally clear that while Jews absorbed non-Jewish culture they also absorbed non-German Jewish customs, practices, and outlooks as well. There is a growing body of literature demonstrating the connection between German and Polish Jewish study and customs and between Italian and German Jewish legal decision-making processes. At the same time, Jews traveled broadly and maintained important business and familial connections throughout a very disperse geographical reach. For this reason, the Jewish community of Prague has been included in this study. While Prague is not really part of the German

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1 Thomas A. Brady, Jr. “The Holy Roman Empire’s Bishops on the Eve of the Reformation,” in Robert J. Blast and Andrew C. Gow (eds), *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History: Essays Presented to Heiko A. Oberman on his 70th Birthday* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 20–47, here at p. 31, n. 44.

2 Jörn Sieglerschmidt, “Social and Economic Landscapes,” in Sheilagh Ogilvie (ed.), *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, volume II: 1639–1800* (London, 1996), pp. 1–38, here at p. 2.

3 See Joseph Davis, “The Reception of the *Shulhan ‘Arukh* and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity,” *AJS Review* 26:2 (2002): 251–76. Davis writes that, “A variety of answers, some complimentary, some contradictory, were offered to these questions by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jews during the conflict over the reception of the *Shulhan ‘Arukh*. It was suggested that the Ashkenazim were the descendants of a group of common ancestors; that they were the Jews who lived in Germany, *Ashkenaz*; that they were those who lived throughout Central and Eastern Europe; that they were Yiddish-speaking Jews; or even, for the purposes of Jewish law, that they were exactly those Jews whose communities accepted the authority of Isserles’ code” (p. 253).

experience documented in most of the sources, it is clear that there were extremely significant connections between the Jews in Germany and Prague and, what is more, within the context of political developments in early modern Germany, Prague played a very crucial role. In addition, the very large and important Jewish community in Prague was responsible for a good deal of intellectual and cultural productivity, and the sources produced by Jews living there in this period expand the scope of material available for consideration.

What follows is divided into six chapters and a brief conclusion. Chapter 1 reviews the nature of memory and history as discussed in general and Jewish scholarship, with particular emphasis on the diversity of ways in which narration of the past could be used for various political, social, and religious purposes. Chapter 2 turns more specifically to early modern German Jewish notions of memory and history as expressed in theological constructs as well as complex understandings of temporality. Here I argue that while early modern Jews frequently employed traditional paradigms in order to make sense of the past, they also narrated the past in order to forge communal identity and to mediate relations with the non-Jewish world.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss various Jewish uses of the past that had significant internal communal value. In Chapter 3, I consider the role of memory in communal governance. After a review of general and Jewish demography in early modern Germany and the structure of Jewish communities, I examine Jewish engagement with the past in community ledgers (*pinkasim*) and local and regional customs (*minhagim*). I conclude that the past narrated by Jews had great communal significance—at certain times confirming traditions and at other times challenging regnant norms and initiating serious communal change. Chapter 4 expands this discussion by considering the social organization of the Jewish communities and highlighting the role of wealth, prestige, and honor in Jewish communal politics. Here I investigate several memorybooks and autobiographical writings for what they reveal about social order and communal power. Throughout, I provide comparisons with the use of memory and history in early modern German Christian writings.

Chapters 5 and 6 chart Jewish engagement with the past as a tool for confronting and, at times, contesting external authority. In Chapter 5, the role of history and memory as devices of political contestation are placed particularly within the context of the Reformation and the growth of general historical production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the one hand, Jews narrated the past in order to recalibrate historical reckoning to include their history and to re-inscribe themselves as the Chosen People of God. On the other hand, such narrations also provided a moral yardstick with which to upbraid the Jews themselves. In Chapter 6, I consider the role of the past in the process of legal decision-making, the engagement with mythic time and magical stories, and the solidification of origin stories, all of which helped to re-situate Jews in early modern German society.

In the end, this book is about the narration of the past by Jews living throughout the early modern or old German Empire. But, it is a book, it is hoped, that will have comparative value for both Jewish and Christian history as well. It reveals the complexities of early modern German Jewish communal life as well as the multifaceted relations that Jews had with German Christians. Fundamentally, this book challenges the assumption that Jews did not think about the past in any more than

typological ways and it asserts that Jews, despite frequent and often bitter anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish activity, maintained important autonomy in the governance of their own communities and significant power in their relations with the outside world. In crafting their memories, early modern Jews were remarkably sophisticated and resilient. They remembered for many purposes and with much subtlety. Their narration of these memories allows a marvelous window into their world and perceptions.