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Glorious, Accursed Europe

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INTRODUCTION

This is not a book about Europe, nor is it about the history of the Jews in Europe.¹ Instead, its aim is to describe some aspects of the complex relationship between Jews and Europe during the past two hundred years.² Several chapters deal with Jews' attempts to understand the essence of Europe, with their perceptions of Europe, and with the various images and topoi of Europe within their worldview; we are concerned with how Jews imagined and invented the idea of Europe and how it existed in the collective memory of an elite group of Jewish thinkers and writers, the ways in which these thinkers interpreted the experience of living in Europe as Jews, and the influence and impact of European heritage on Jewish culture. A discussion of this sort, in our opinion, will not only shed light on how Jewish thinkers and literati understood and interpreted key issues in both modern European and modern Jewish history, but will also—we hope—contribute to an understanding of those very same issues. In other words, the book also deals with the reality that existed beyond images and perceptions, and we argue that modern Jews are European Jews in the sense that a large and central part of their values, culture, and behavior is European.

In the historian Heinrich (Zvi) Graetz's "The Correspondence of an English Lady on Judaism and Semitism," Edith (the lady) posed a rhetorical question: "can you de-Europeanize us?" Could the educated classes of Jewish society, she asked, be saved from the "Europeanness [that] fills the entire field of vision?"³ This question had occupied Jews since the beginning of the nineteenth century in various, and rapidly evolving, environments, and it continued to occupy them after Europe rose against them and attempted to destroy them. The variety of answers to the question about Europeanness notwithstanding, it is abundantly clear that Jews were neither able nor willing to erase the European heritage from the Jewish experience.

This book examines several different subjects: interpretations, images, perceptions, and even prophecies on the one hand; and beliefs, values, and cultural practices on the other hand. With respect to the latter, it deals with the influence of Europe and Western culture on Jewish society and

culture, particularly in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Jewish Palestine, and the relationships among perceptions and images, and cultural reality. By “cultural reality” we refer, in the European context, to processes of acculturation and, in the context of Palestine, to the influence of the European heritage and its cultural assets on the construction of the new Jewish society and culture there—as well as the role that the antinomy between West and East played in that construction. As we will discover, the terms “Europe” and “Europeanness” became rallying cries, labels, and standards for judgment and evaluation in Israeli society, and they now form part of the struggle over the character of Israeli culture and the *Kulturkampf* taking place within it.

Our book deals with Jews rather than with *the* Jews: in other words, it examines a varied group of thinkers, literati, and political figures who operated in different environments—primarily in Eastern and Central Europe (including Germany). These thinkers do not represent all of the camps and streams of thought that have been part of the modern Jewish world—a world that, during the nineteenth century, became more pluralistic than ever and that was divided by profound internal disagreements over, among other things, how Europe should be approached. The figures whose work we will cite here represent several aspects of the climate of the time, and they demonstrate Jews’ polar and complex attitudes toward Europe as it was and as they imagined it to be, beginning at the start of the nineteenth century. The texts we cite, primarily in the second and third chapters, reflect the general moods of optimism and pessimism during the period, expressing European superiority on the one hand, and a consciousness of crisis and decline on the other hand. However, Jews had their own reasons to believe that Europe represented the pinnacle of human achievement, and simultaneously other good reasons to keep an anxious eye on expressions of “degeneration” and “decline.” They had many good reasons to follow what was unfolding in Europe—expectantly, hopefully, but also with concern—to try to understand Europe, and to prophesy its fate.

WHY EUROPE?

We begin with three quotes, which emphasize three different points of view about Jews’ relationship with Europe, and Europe’s relationship with Jews.

Europe is ours; we are among those most responsible for its creation. Over the course of eighteen hundred years, we have, relatively

speaking, contributed no less to it than any of the great “Western” nations. However, beyond that, we began creating Europe long before its common beginning—long before even the Athenians began to create it. For the chief characteristics of European civilization—discontent, the “struggle with God,” the concept of progress; that very gulf between the two conceptions of the world manifested in the antithesis of two beliefs—in the “Golden Age” and in the “Messiah,” an ideal of the past and an ideal of the future—these characteristics are ones that we bestowed upon Europe long before our forefathers arrived there. As for the Bible, we brought it with us fully formed.

Perhaps more than any other nation, we have the right to say that “Western” culture is bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh, spirit of our spirit. To renounce “Westernness,” to adhere to what is typical of the “Orient,” signifies denial of our selves. I refer, of course, to moral “Europe.”⁴

These words belong to Zeev Jabotinsky, a Zionist leader who was without a doubt one of the more enthusiastic Europhiles among the Zionist leadership,⁵ and they reflect an image of Europe that was part of the worldview of several Jewish circles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In truth this was far more than an image: it was, rather, a far-reaching claim that Jews had actually invented Europe. Europe was not only a continent, which in 1925 had a population of 9.2 million Jews (about 63 percent of the world’s Jewish population, which also included 4.8 million American Jews, nearly all of whom had emigrated from Europe); nor was it merely a place of which Jews formed an inseparable part. Far more than this, Europe was a culture and civilization whose character had been created and shaped by Jews under the defining influence of the Jewish heritage, first and foremost the Hebrew Bible. In this view, Jews were clearly *Homo europaeus*; it was they who had created Europe and determined its worldview and fundamental values. Jewishness (*Judensein*) and Europeanness were consequently one and the same. Without Jews there could be no Europe; every positive aspect of Europe had a Jewish source, while every negative aspect originated elsewhere.

More than forty years earlier, in 1882, Moshe Leib Lilienblum, who was a leading figure in the Jewish national movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, experienced a revelation. One night—“as I lay in bed”—he discovered the painful truth: “We are strangers . . . we are

strangers not only here [in Russia] but in the whole of Europe, for it is not the homeland of our people . . . Yes, we are Semites . . . among Aryans; the children of Shem among the children of Japheth . . . foundlings, uninvited guests.”⁶ Jews were uninvited guests, and the gaping chasm between them and non-Jews—Lilienblum used the terms “Semite” and “Aryan,” which were part of the lexicon of the nineteenth century—could never be bridged. The consequence was that incurable malady: Judeophobia and modern antisemitism.

The writer and thinker Michah Yosef Berdichevsky, a native of Podolia who had emigrated west (to Germany) in 1890, wrote in 1899:

My heart emptied of ancient history and filled instead with new ideas and emotions which brought me to a state of intoxication, to a state of ardor. My being, my existence, my belonging, and my desires shrank down into a single point, and from this point I beheld and examined the entire world. This point was Western culture. To the West! I knelt and bowed before the name. My most heartfelt wish was that God might spread the spirit of Western culture over all life, that the land might be filled with its knowledge and thought.⁷

In Berdichevsky’s opinion, Europe had not become Jewish; instead, the Jews must become Europeans—or, more precisely, Western Europeans.

Jabotinsky’s rather pretentious argument, as we will see in chapter 4, was an expression of the desire to declare that modern Jews had a place in Europe, and of a sense of belonging, identity, and partnership with Europe and especially with its values. This claim emerged in the nineteenth century in order to serve as Jews’ admission ticket to the modern era, and it expanded over the course of the century into a claim that the Jews had made a decisive contribution to the creation of modernity, in all its aspects and manifestations, and were in fact its primary creators and progenitors. Here was an unequivocal response to the description of Jews as uninvited and unwanted guests in Europe, alien to it and its spirit not only in their religion, but also with respect to character and race, to use the vocabulary of the time. This declaration of belonging to Europe—even of being responsible for it—acquired an entirely different meaning in the anti-Jewish literature, which not only described the Jews as an alien minority within Europe but also encouraged and disseminated the false claim that, rather than a feeble minority, the Jews were a terrifying force that had managed to dominate Europe and even Judaize it.⁸ The conclusion was that in order to rescue the authentic Europe and extract it

from the Jewish domination over its body and soul—a domination that was the very source of and reason for the profound crisis in which Europe found itself—the Jews must either leave Europe of their own will or be uprooted from it.

Despite deeply different attitudes to Europe and to the role Jews played in its history (and to the future they might expect there), Jabotinsky, Lilienblum, and Berdichevsky shared a great admiration for Europe: not necessarily for the concrete historical European reality, but rather for its basic values—that is, for Western culture. And all three feared that both antisemitism and Jews' disappointment in Europe, which had not fulfilled their expectations, would lead to a Jewish rejection of every European cultural asset. The three referred in their work not to any particular part of Europe, but rather to Europe as a single historical and cultural entity.

Yet Europe and Europeanness were not invented by Jews, nor were they the product of Jews' presence or influence. It is true that during the modern era, Jews were part of Europe and contributed significantly to the creation of its various national cultures, as well as to modern European culture in general. Many among them took pride in this contribution and publicized it. However, to speak of Jews in general, or to attribute specific attributes or abilities to them collectively, amounts in our opinion to constructing a mythical Jew and is both mistaken and misleading. The unavoidable result of such generalizations was to attribute to Jews the responsibility or blame for the emergence of capitalism and socialism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism—in other words, to see traces of Jewish influence in every development and every event.

Before Jews could claim to belong to it and identify with it, Europe had to develop flesh and form and become at once a historical entity and a utopian concept (see chapter 1). And before Jews could claim full partnership in and identify with any particular national culture, nationalism itself had to emerge, take shape, and become a dominant phenomenon. Only then, beginning at the start of the nineteenth century, did Jews need to take a position in regard to the European entity—to define their approach to it and to the ideals of Europe and Europeanness. And only since the beginning of the nineteenth century were they required to define their ties to the various nation-states and national cultures that took shape during this time. These attitudes and positions were expressed in their lifestyles, in a repertoire of perceptions and images, and in attempts to understand and interpret the meaning of “Europe” and “Europeanness”

and the distinctions among Europe's national cultures. They had to define their expectations of Europe and to determine which European values were worthy of adoption. In other words, from the start of the nineteenth century, the attempt to understand Europe became a central part of Jews' worldview.

It is highly tempting to describe Jews' attitude toward Europe as dichotomous—as a bipolar attitude of adoration and disgust, hatred and love, rejection and influence. Europe was beloved and admired, its culture perceived as the acme of human progress and a treasury of spiritual and cultural assets that must not be forsaken; but at the same time, it was also perceived as a decadent, corrupt world—a place where Jewish people were persecuted and murdered. Europe was at once both glorious and accursed.

Yet a dichotomous description of Jews' approach to and perceptions of Europe would be ahistorical. As captivating as such a description might be, it does not offer a full picture of Jews' encounters with Europe—a picture that must be dynamic, layered, and complex. There was more than one Europe.

EUROCENTRISM AND JUDEOCENTRISM

Given the discussion above, our point of view may be considered both Eurocentric and Judeocentric.

It is Eurocentric because until World War II, Europe was in many ways the center of the world—and not only for Jews, who were not the only group to encounter Europe.⁹ During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and, indeed, well before then—Europe saw itself as the apotheosis of human development and a torchbearer of enlightenment and progress. It was Europe that named those parts of the world that lay beyond its borders and, from its perspective, discovered them. Europe was the model to which the others who lived outside of it compared themselves and were in turn compared, the ideal to which they aspired and whose challenges they strove to meet, and the standard by which they were judged and judged themselves.¹⁰ At the same time, Europe's conception of itself was perceived as a clear declaration of superiority that permitted the oppression of the others and imposed upon them a worldview and values extrinsic to their own. As a result, it became a mirror through which they examined themselves, a challenge to which they responded, and an enemy that they had to confront.

After World War I, there arose in Europe voices of lamentation and tidings of Europe's decline. Other voices began to express doubts regarding its centrality and especially the universality of its values. Despite this, it cannot be said that Europe's influence on other nations declined.¹¹ In contrast, after World War II—during the postcolonial era—these doubts increased, and Europe's influence did weaken. Once again Europe was confronted with the questions of what its values were and where its borders lay—of the meaning of Europe and Europeanness. Once more it was devoured by doubts, despair, and self-criticism, filled with the foreboding that *finis Europae*—the end of Europe—was in sight. Yet while the Eurocentric worldview has declined considerably, Europe today remains a model to others, a subject of admiration and aspiration.

Ours is also a Judeocentric point of view—not only because of the importance we attribute to the history of Europe's Jews, and not only because the so-called Jewish Question was the central issue that occupied Europe in the modern age, but because, in our opinion, an analysis of how Jews understood Europe offers a unique perspective on the history of Europe and Western culture over the past two hundred years. The Jewish encounter with Europe, or the Jewish experience in Europe, is more than a central part of Jewish history, more even than a source of explanations for the tragic conclusion of that experience. In our opinion, it also offers a unique vantage point from which we may try to understand the history of Europe itself. This is because in contrast to other peoples outside of Europe, Jews were not part of the world of which European colonialism and imperialism took control, and upon which they imposed the processes of westernization. They were an integral part of the history of Europe, and as a result they observed it both up close, from within, and at a distance, as strangers.¹²

Jews thus had a dual perspective regarding Europe: they were insiders, who saw themselves as flesh of Europe's flesh and were involved in European life and the European experience; and they were outsiders, who approached Europe from the position of a minority or other group caught between two worlds. Jews created their topoi of Europe through a combination of knowledge, preconceptions, and stereotypes. Some Jews even compared themselves to the scientific instruments that detect earthquakes. An example of such claims appears in the anthology *Kehiliateinu* (Our community), which reflects the worldview of a small group of radical Zionist pioneers in Palestine during the early 1920s: "We—the youth of Israel—have experienced the life of Europe, its tremors, and its anxieties

with all the fervor of our youth. We were like a seismograph that recorded every slight tremor.”¹³ According to this assertion, the Jews’ dual status within European society and their great sensitivity to developments there were what made them able to sense omens before others. The poet Uri Zvi Greenberg, for example, declared in 1926 that Europe in the twentieth century had been “robbed of heaven” and that only Jews walked in her midst as astrologers (*etztagnin*); according to him, they alone could understand the depth of European reality and foretell Europe’s future and destiny.¹⁴

WHICH EUROPE?

With which Europe are we concerned here? With Europe as a unified cultural entity, or as a combination of multiple identities and multiple cultures and values? In fact, with both. Jews were well aware of the profound differences among the various European cultures. They even emphasized these differences and demonstrated (as we shall see in chapter 7) entirely different attitudes toward individual national cultures. As a result, there were differences in their expectations of the processes of civil and cultural integration in various countries. Moreover, during the nineteenth century, Jews began to believe—some hopefully, some fearfully—that the unity of the Jewish people belonged to the past, and that this was a new age of Jewish Germans, Jewish Frenchmen, Jewish Russians, and so forth. Yet at the same time, some Jews believed that in many respects national borders were meaningless, and that cultural assets and values extended beyond borders to create a single Europe, and consequently a single European Jewish people as well.

The attempt to understand Europe and Europeanness, and on the strength of this understanding to forecast the future that awaited it and the Jews, occupied Europe’s Jewish elite since the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and emancipation. The questions asked and the answers given have undergone countless changes and evolutions over the course of the past two hundred years. Various historical contexts raised new questions, which led to different answers. The desire on the part of Israeli Jews to understand all matters relating to Europe and Western culture¹⁵ stemmed—and still stems—from three necessities:

1. To determine the borders and domain of European culture’s actual and desired influence on society and culture in Israel (in fact, in Jewish Pal-

estine since the 1880s). This is related to the struggle being waged over the cultural composition of Israeli society, the definition of its identity, its cultural affinity, and its geographical and political belonging.

2. To take a position on the political events that have taken place in Europe since the 1990s, as well as to select one of the following options: to remain a backwater of this unified civilization from an economic and political point of view;¹⁶ to become an inseparable part of it; to bind Israel's fate to the American empire; or to be part of the Arab-Muslim Middle East.
3. To take a position on the issue of the antisemitism, both open and concealed, which has once again emerged in Europe.¹⁷ In this context, a question arises: which is the real Europe—the irrational, fanatical, imperialistic, antisemitic, and racist Europe, or the rational, tolerant Europe, which exhibits openness, curiosity, and impatience, and strives for wholeness?

Two answers to this question have appeared in Israeli discourse. According to the first, Europe at the close of the twentieth century and the birth of the twenty-first is realizing the ancient ideal of a federative continent—a continent that has shed nationalism and put an end to international wars and imperial arrogance. But according to the second, materialism, technological advancement, comfort, self-satisfaction, and serenity at the end of the twentieth century will not be able to prevent the rebirth of the forces of darkness of the not-so-distant past, with anti-semitism at the forefront. The second answer raises additional questions: Is this simply a case of mistaking shadows for mountains, and does the criticism of Europe stem not from existential fear but from Jewish or Israeli paranoia, a hatred of Europe, and an inability to understand that Europe in the second half of the twentieth century is not Europe in the first half, but an entirely new entity? Or are Jews indeed the sensitive seismograph picking up signals from the depths, able to discern that the fault lines of calamity still lie within the magic mountain (*Zauberberg*) of Europe?¹⁸

The reality of the dichotomous Jewish opinion of Europe—and of what Europe symbolizes and represents—was born and formulated during the nineteenth century and persisted throughout the twentieth. Despite the Holocaust, Jews' basic views regarding Europe changed little even at the start of the twenty-first century. Is it desirable or possible to remove Europeanness from modern Jewish culture, or should it be cultivated?

Should the State of Israel be part of Europe, or should it turn its back on Europe—and Western culture? These questions continue to be asked with great intensity by a Jewish society that exists outside of Europe. This fact reveals, among other things, that Europe and Europeanness hold a central place not only in the Jewish memory, but in Israel's present and its future as well.