Marketing Identities

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Published by Wayne State University Press

Brenner, David A.
Marketing Identities: The Invention of Jewish Ethnicity in Ost und West.

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This book originated in 1989–90 as Eastern Europe was disintegrating and with it the German Democratic Republic. To reflect on East-West issues and the imagining of communities and nations—even in turn-of-the-century Jewish contexts—appeared utterly unavoidable. Later, in 1990–91, the Federal Republic of Germany served as my base. As I began “dissertating” there, the inhabitants—characterized as Ossis/Wessis—were confronting and crossing boundaries that seemed prefigured in the discursive universe that was Ost und West. The predicament of “the Wall within the head” not only was reminiscent of the two (pre-Holocaust) European Jewries, but it also raised the question, more urgently than ever, of the “Germanies,” of their “inventions,” “ethnicities,” and “self-stereotyping.” This study also came to fruition during the election campaigns of 1991–92 in the United States and the ensuing analysis of sound bites, political rhetoric, and the mass media that they provoked. What follows, then, is itself history and a commentary—through a glass darkly, as it were—on those years. In that sense (and others), all responsibility for its contents is my own.

It would be difficult to thank everyone who made Marketing Identities possible. My doctoral committee, for starters, deserves special mention. Under the tutelage of my advisers, John M. Hoberman and Janet K. Swaffar, the dissertation achieved its completion in August 1993. It was John who
first inspired me to come to the University of Texas and who has helped me overcome lapses into a cumbersome, jargony style. Janet showed an interest in my development at an early stage of my Austin sojourn, encouraging me at every step in the writing process and never letting me forget my obligations to pedagogy and the profession. Katherine Arens critiqued (too) many drafts of the dissertation and returned them all with superhuman alacrity. By a twist of fate, Kirsten Belgum was also researching journals and nationalism; this study reflects her insights into methodology. Seth Wolitz first brought my attention to the extensive holdings of Ost und West at the Harry Ransom Center, and he graciously permitted me to mine his inexhaustible knowledge of Jewish cultures and their history.

Other teachers also proved helpful. Hans Otto Horch in Aachen generously hosted my initial year of Ph.D. research there and warrants credit for being the pioneer in the field of German-Jewish periodical studies. Walter Wetzels, Robert King, Peter Hess, David Price, and Mark Louden all offered advice in Austin. At the postdoctoral stage, I am grateful for the insights of Sander Gilman, David Sorkin, and Michael Brenner—all of whom commented on earlier drafts of the manuscript—not to speak of the two anonymous readers of Wayne State University Press. Thanks also go to Marion Kaplan, who critiqued an early version of chapter 4. Arthur Evans, director of the press, has always been obliging and accommodating. His editorial and production staff—Jennifer Backer, Meg Humes, and Alice Nigoghosian, and copy editor Wendy Warren Keebler—made an attractive spectacle out of a word-processed manuscript and a skeletal list of illustrations.

At the University of Colorado, William Safran and many others critiqued my work and offered support. I have left until last one colleague who offered invaluable help as he struggled with similar issues of German and Jewish cultural history. Michael Berkowitz, despite his busy schedule, was a “gentle” reader and source of constant support, always taking time for seemingly endless E-mail inquiries.

It is my pleasure finally to thank those institutions that provided generous grants at crucial stages of this project: the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I also received assistance and hospitality at the following libraries and archives: the Leo Baeck Institute (New York), the Humanities Research Center (Austin), the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York), the Central Zionist Archives (Jerusalem), the Germania Judaica (Cologne), the Alliance Israélite Universelle (Paris), and the Archiv Bibliographia Judaica (Frankfurt a.M). Thanks go especially to Diane Spielman and Michael Heymann. I am also grateful to the staffs of Interlibrary Loan at the University of Texas, the Technische Hochschule Aachen, and the University of Colorado.

Portions of this book have been previously published in earlier forms. Part of chapter 3 originally appeared as “Out of the Ghetto and into the

Without the friendship of several individuals, this work may never have achieved completion. Words are not sufficient to thank my sister Lynn and brother-in-law Jeff, Robert Boone, Jeff Grossman, Achim Jaeger, Itzik Gottesman, the Oppenheims, Stan Taylor and Katie Kelfer, Carol Harvel, Glenn and Ursula Levine, Stephan March, Michael Gumbert, and many, many others. Jeff, Itzik, Achim, and Glenn merit distinction for many stimulating conversations related to questions dealt with in the book.

I wish also to thank my parents and stepparents, Larry and Gloria, Gladys and Jules, for their personal and financial support—and not just their patient understanding. Along with them, my enduring love goes out to my wife, Rachel. She not only took an interest in the project from day one, sharing her expertise as a member of Germany’s post-Holocaust Jewish community, but she also put up with my most unpoetic, ultra-wissenschaftlich moments.

Ithaca, NY
December 25. What I discern of contemporary Jewish literature in Warsaw through Löwy, and of contemporary Czech literature partly through my own insight, points to the fact that many of the benefits of literature—the stimulating of minds, the integrated cohesion of national consciousness, often unrealized in public life and always on the verge of disintegration, the pride and support that a nation derives from a literature of its own in the face of the hostile surrounding world, this keeping of a diary by a nation that is something entirely different from historiography and results in a more rapid (and yet always closely scrutinized) development, the elaborate spiritualization of civic life in its full range, the combining of dissatisfied elements that are immediately put to use precisely in this sphere where stagnation can only do harm, the constant organization of a people with respect to its whole that is created by the hustle and bustle of magazines, the restricting of the nation's attention to its own affairs and the admission of what is foreign only by way of reflection, the birth of a respect for those active in literature, the awakening in the younger generation of higher aspirations, which though transient leaves its permanent mark, the acknowledgment of literary events as objects of political concern, the refinement of the antithesis between fathers and sons and the possibility of discussing this, the presentation of national faults in a manner that can be very painful but also liberating and deserving of forgiveness, the beginning of a lively and therefore self-confident book trade and the craving for books—all these effects can be produced by a literature whose development is not unusually broad in scope, but seems to be because it lacks notable talents.

Franz Kafka, Diaries, 1911 (emphasis added).