Marketing Identities

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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 presfigured 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.

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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.

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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 bustle 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).