German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic. By John M. Ephron (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) Pp. 352. Hardcover, $45.00.

While German and Polish Jews were culturally the same until the early eighteenth century, the advent of Hasidism, which never gained purchase with German Jews, swept through Polish Jewry like a storm. This created two distinct forms of Ashkenazim (Jews of Central or Eastern European ancestry) – the Hasidic Polish Jews who remained in poverty and the German Jews who experienced a period of embourgeoisement during their quest for emancipation. To that end, John M. Efron's *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* is about "the German-Jewish quest to be seen as dignified, as refined, as physically appealing" in a journey through the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[1] The title may lead to assumptions that many German Jews were concerned with the Sephardim (medieval Jews of Iberian ancestry). To be clear, many German Jews were more concerned with occidentalization to better fit in with their Gentile neighbors as opposed to orientalization while they were adopting middle class values. However, Efron explains that it was the "elites who molded Jewish popular opinion in Germany" that saw a particular allure in the medieval Sephardim as a way to enhance all of German Jewry in the eyes of non-Jews.[2] These elites were the driving force behind a new wave of German Jewish identity formation, and their constant invocation of the Sephardic Jews, the Golden Age, and Islam played a significant role in transforming modern German Jewry.[3]

Such a study lends itself well to the idea of orientalism because of the Islamic influence on the Iberian Peninsula. Edward Said's canonical work *Orientalism* is a useful lens through which to interpret European literature and history, but often by being repurposed, adapted, and expanded. Indeed, the best and most effective way to critique Said is to expand on the framework and fill in the gaps. For Said, orientalism heavily relied on British and French imperialism, but Efron seeks to expand this perception, claiming that orientalism can also include an appreciation for certain oriental styles in culture, architecture, dress, and appearance. Perhaps more significantly, however, German Jews could look to the Orient for "lessons about tolerance and acceptance."[4] Beyond this, however, Efron fails to specifically address why the cult of the Sephardic Jews was so appealing.

To this end, Efron organizes his book topically over five chapters, each a focal point of the German Jewish elite reformers: language, aesthetics, architecture, literature, and scholarship. Chapter 1 addresses the modernization of the way German Jews spoke. Leading members of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) were deeply concerned with developing a secularized and modern version of Hebrew. The maskilim (the followers or adherents of the Haskalah) rejected the Ashkenazic style of pronunciation because it was too reminiscent of Yiddish, a language many German Jews were abandoning in favor of pure German. Instead, the maskilim advocated for the Sephardic style of pronunciation. Moses Mendelssohn, perhaps the most well-known German-Jewish philosopher, took up the challenge to replace the vulgar and unaccultured Yiddish spoken by the Ashkenazim with pure, biblical Hebrew that had been spoken by

[1] John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2016), 1.
[2] Efron, *German Jewry*, 2.
[3] Efron, *German Jewry,* 231.
[4] Efron, *German Jewry*, 16.

Sephardic Jews. What resulted was not really Sephardic, but a blend of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic languages. Most significant, however, is not the linguistics of modern Hebrew, but the demonstration of German Jewry's desire to improve their language, which to them reflected inner moral health and outward physical appearance, and remake their culture "in the image of an imagined (and better) Jewish Other."[5]

Chapter 2 similarly examines the aesthetics of German Jewry as envisioned by the maskilim. Coupled with anthropologists and ethnographers, the maskilim determined that the Sephardim were the closest representation and supposedly the true descendants of the Israelites and therefore the most physically beautiful Jews in stark contrast to the eastern Ashkenazim. The suggestion was that even the most caricatured Eastern European Jew could become just as beautiful as the Sephardic Jew of the Middle Ages with the proper education and language skills. Another significant link between language and aesthetics was the belief that the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew was the authentic language of the ancient Israelites. Chapter 3 also concerns Jewish beauty, but this time focusing on the architectural realm, viewing buildings as reflections of value and self-perception. German Jews began to build synagogues in a neo-Moorish style to reflect their exploration into a new oriental identity. Efron explores in detail synagogues in Dresden, Leipzig, Vienna, and Berlin, which embraced both the duality of a German and Jewish identity longing for the Sephardic and the symbolic rejection of Ashkenazic synagogues through the new architecture. Interestingly, the neo-Moorish designs that became so popular were built in an imagined Sephardic style, but the leading German Jews wanted a convincing way to answer questions of Jewish origins in ancient Israel, the Jewish diaspora, and "the nature of German-Jewish identity."[6]

Chapters 4 and 5 elucidate two closely related genres: historical literature and scholarship. The commonalities between the two are perhaps best exemplified by one of the most prominent maskili, Heinrich Heine. Heine wrote novellas and poetry using the historical experience of the Marranos, or Christianized Jews in medieval Spain contemporary to the Sephardic Jews, as an analogy for German Jewry – the Marranos were not just historical reflections, but self-portraits of the new Ashkenazim stuck between two worlds, straddling a line of multiple identities. Other scholars in the maskilic tradition, such as Abraham Geiger, the founding father of the Jewish reform movement; Heinrich Graetz, the most influential Jewish historian of the nineteenth century; and Ignaz Goldziher, a leading Jewish scholar of Islam, also focused on the orientalist connections between Islam and the Spanish-Jewish past that was constructed by Jewish historians.

In elucidating how German Jews turned to a specific type of orientalism for the purposes of identity formation, Efron demonstrates that British and French imperialists did not have a monopoly on orientalism. The Ashkenazic orientalists in Germany did not look to the modern Middle East and North Africa as places for imperialism, but rather to a mythic past during the Golden Age of the Sephardic Jews in medieval Spain for inspiration as an example of lessons on tolerance and acceptance. On the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule, the Sephardic Jews (allegedly) flourished. The whole book would be best read as an extension and reworking

[5] Efron, *German Jewry*, 52.
[6] Efron, *German Jewry,* 18.

of Said and an orientalist mindset more broadly even if it is more frequently implied rather than stated outright, while keeping in mind that such a singular focus on Said should not cloud the connections and rupture between German and Eastern European Jewries and the inner mentality of German Jews. This book is an excellent addition to the historiography of German Jewry for specialists, and any graduate seminar on Modern Europe would be remiss to overlook it.

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