



Deborah Hertz. *How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 276 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11094-4.



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How Jews Became Christians

“The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed.”[1] It was with these words, an excerpt from Karl August Varnhagen von Ense’s recollections of his wife Rahel’s dying words, that Hannah Arendt began her biography of the celebrated Berlin *salonnière* Rahel Varnhagen. Arendt wrote her study of Varnhagen in the 1930s just as the Nazis were coming to power, and she tended to paint her subject in heroic terms, as a precursor to those “conscious pariahs” that appear again and again in the many essays she devoted to Jewish topics from the 1930s to the 1960s.[2] Tellingly, Arendt gave her study the subtitle *The Life of a Jewess*, and as Deborah Hertz points out in her fascinating new book on Jewish conversions to Christianity from 1645 until the year of Varnhagen’s death in 1833, Arendt chose to underplay one crucial detail: her heroic Jewess was in fact a convinced and committed Protestant.

For the most part, conversion has hardly been a popular topic among Jewish historians. In the late nineteenth

century, pioneering Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz sought to draw clear battle lines, singling out Varnhagen and the numerous other Jews of Berlin’s elite who converted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as part of a baptismal epidemic that deserved to be remembered with shame. While Graetz’s heirs today have rejected his moralizing tone, for the most part Jewish historians have yet to subject the diverse experiences of German Jews who, for whatever reason, embraced Christianity to serious study.[3] As Hertz notes in the introduction to her pioneering study, this is a major lacuna. When the Nazis came to power, Germany had a Jewish community of just over five hundred thousand, yet as Nazi officials soon discovered, the numbers of Christians with some level of Jewish ancestry almost equaled the number of Jews. Rather than following in the footsteps of recent historians of German Jewry and revisiting questions of assimilation and acculturation within the Jewish community, Hertz’s *How Jews Became Germans* moves into new terrain, forcing us to face the subtleties of the life stories of the ancestors of these non-Jewish Germans

of Jewish descent.

With the help of church officials and Jewish genealogical research, the Nazis created elaborate records of conversions in Berlin. This data set is not huge—few years in the period under study saw more than one hundred baptisms, and many saw considerably fewer—but it is unique in its sustained attention to conversion over time in a city experiencing such dramatic social, economic, and political change. Hertz taps this resource to offer an illuminating statistical analysis of converts in Berlin, paying careful attention to gender, age, and marriage patterns. Against this backdrop, she sketches out the history of conversions in Berlin from the mid-seventeenth century to Rahel Varnhagen’s death. She gives rich and nuanced accounts of the decisions converts faced and explores the often unexpected consequences of baptism for those who sought to seek emancipation through conversion to Christianity. Throughout the book, Hertz emphasizes the complexity of individual Jews’ choices to convert, and this is the book’s great strength. Hertz insists that we grasp the forces shaping these Berlin Jews’ lives without the moralizing hindsight of either the Holocaust or the visions of a harmonious co-existence of *Judentum* and *Deutschtum* that gained such currency in German-Jewish life in the period after she closes her study.

More than any other figure, it is Rahel Varnhagen who captures Hertz’s attention, but she begins her story much earlier, reconstructing the lives of several Jews who converted, primarily for religious reasons, in the period from 1645 to 1770. Varnhagen was born in 1771, and when Hertz moves into the period of her life, she studies her story alongside that of scores of other Jews who converted during that era, most of whom were from much wealthier social strata than their seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century counterparts. As Hertz points out, for many Prussian Jews during this era, conversion provided the only route to political emancipation. (At the same time, for other, particularly privileged, Jews, conversion could lead to a loss of status and prestige.) For some of Hertz’s subjects in this period, baptism was still religiously motivated, and she skillfully charts the life stories of converts alongside the experimentation with Jewish religious reform that the Prussian state brought to an abrupt halt in 1823. But for many others born into the Jewish community, she points out, Protestantism held great appeal as a more secular force, a civic religion that could serve to integrate Jews into a nascent German nation. Abraham Mendelssohn, father of the famous composer Felix and son of the Jewish philosopher

Moses Mendelssohn, for instance, spoke about his conversion without any reference to religious motives. For Ludwig Bäcker from Frankfurt, whom Hertz casts as the “first secular left convert,” baptism hardly constituted a religious act at all; it was, rather, a sign of entry into a “thicker, politicized Protestant identity” that was “more attractive than a thinner, less civic Judaism” (p. 156). Radically secular Jews converted in this manner, moreover, at a time when many Christian intellectuals were eager to construct identities for themselves that similarly moved beyond the contingencies of birth and upbringing. For Jewish women, allegiances to German high culture could fuel a desire to convert, and Jewish men in particular were often motivated by professional ambitions.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Moses Mendelssohn may have been cast as the archetypal figure who managed to balance commitments to Judaism with openness to secular culture. But, as Hertz argues, in the Prussian capital in the decades following Mendelssohn’s death in 1786, Mendelssohn’s vision of a dual identity for German Jews seemed an increasingly unrealistic project, and her book is without equal when it comes to reconstructing the complex worlds in which her subjects chose to leave Judaism behind. Hertz notes at crucial junctures throughout the book that the group of Berlin Jews she analyzes is hardly representative of German Jewry as a whole. Some readers wanting an argument with a broader scope may find Hertz’s exclusive concern with Berlin Jewry frustrating, just as others might wish that she had not stopped so abruptly with Varnhagen’s death in 1833. After the 1830s, Hertz notes, rates of baptism fell off considerably, and it is also after this period that we witness the rapid expansion of the German-Jewish press, the creation of a much more broadly based German-Jewish middle class, and much more extensive debates about religious reform and modernization in the German-Jewish community as a whole. Berlin itself also experienced tremendous growth in the period following 1833, becoming one of the great centers of European Jewish life by 1900. But Hertz succeeds brilliantly in exploring what she sets out to do, giving a fascinating portrait of a pivotal historical moment when for so many of German Jewry’s “best and brightest” (p. 221), conversion to Christianity seemed a particularly auspicious mode of embracing the modern world. The fact that her multifaceted narrative links up with so many of the crucial intellectual and figures of the day—Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Mendelssohn, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Ludwig Bäcker, Heinrich Heine, and so on—only underscores the importance of Hertz’s book for our

more general understanding of the political and intellectual culture of Berlin from 1770 to 1833. The converts Hertz studies may not have been typical, but their experiences were of tremendous symbolic value for subsequent generations of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans in Berlin and beyond.

When Jews Became German is a major book and will be required reading for anyone interested in the history of German Jewry, for intellectual historians, and for historians of religion in modern Germany. Compellingly written, it is also a pleasure to read and should be as accessible to the lay reader as it is essential to the professional historian. Masterfully, Hertz manages to move with ease between the numerous individual life stories she reconstructs and broader trends in Prussian political,

cultural, and religious life in the period under study. The result is a subtle, dynamic study that is truly without peer in the field of German-Jewish Studies.

Notes

[1]. Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 196.

[2]. See here the recent collection edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, *Hannah Arendt: The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

[3]. There is one major exception for the early modern period: Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1750* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

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