The Jewish Cultural Tapestry

International Jewish Folk Traditions

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Folk Traditions

What Are They and Why Do They Vary Geographically?

WHAT IS IT THAT HAS MADE THE JEWISH PEOPLE, SCATTERED ALL OVER THE WORLD for over 2000 years, one people despite the lack of a homeland for most of that time? The answer, in the words of the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, is "tradition." At least until the beginning of modern times, Jews shared a common devotion to the Torah. Torah meant both a set of books (the Five Books of Moses) and a common set of religious norms, laws, and practices that they could carry with them wherever they went. The Torah and its tradition taught Jews that they were descendants of the same ancestors, had been slaves in Egypt, had entered the Holy Land, and then had been expelled because of their sins. Study

of the Torah and the other sacred texts, as well as prayers, were conducted in Hebrew, the shared ancestral language of the Israelites.

The Great Tradition and the Little Tradition

Even though Jews felt such strong ties to a common book, a common tradition, and a common ancestry, they differed from each other tremendously. This wasn't only evidence of the truth of the proverb "two Jews, three opinions," it was a result of the fact that the same tradition that held the Jews of the world together also separated them.

Actually it wasn't the same tradition. Jewish culture, like all other major traditions, really consists of two parts: the official culture and the folk culture, or, as anthropologists like to put it, the "great tradition" and the "little tradition." The great tradition, written in books and enshrined in the laws of the Jewish religion, was the uniting factor. It stretched back to ancient times and described the very beginning of the Jewish people. It spoke of their heroic common ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The great tradition had an advantage that was particularly important for the Jews—it was portable. Wherever Jews went, they could take their books with them. Because all Jewish scholars and many Jewish laymen (but not most Jewish women) were literate in the common Hebrew-Aramaic language, they could read what Jews in other lands wrote with little difficulty. If scholars wrote new works, the manuscripts could make their way to other countries to be copied or printed there. Jews of Yemen studied the Bible and Talmud commentaries of Rashi born in eleventh century France, just as Jews in Poland could study the works of Maimonides, born in twelfth century Spain. Neither time nor place made much difference. Once something was written down and codified, it was made permanent.

But Jewish communities never enshrined all of their culture in books. No book, even the most holy or the most comprehensive, could include every detail of life. There was always room for filling in the details not codified in the great

tradition through the creation and practice of Jewish folk tradition (the little tradition). Folk traditions, which were intended to make the pages of the written tradition come to life, had completely different characteristics from the great tradition. Since they were not written down, they could not be passed down at a distance. They depended on example, word of mouth, and local conditions. They could be learned only from people with whom one came into personal contact.

The little tradition learned through the family and the community did not have the ancient pedigree of the Bible and the Talmud. It did not require formal education to acquire the little tradition, as it did to learn the texts of the great tradition. But for the unlearned, probably always the majority, it was the little tradition to which they had the greatest emotional attachment. The melodies of family and synagogue rituals, holiday foods, spoken language, proverbs, and lifestyle were what gave flavor to Judaism. The holy texts might be venerated, respected, and even obeyed, but they seemed more distant from daily life. The common people knew the great tradition of Jewish religion mainly via the little tradition of the life of their own communities.

When you look at the great and little traditions from the outside, the tremendous gap between the two becomes apparent. The world of the Bible and of ancient Judaism seems very distant from the world of the Eastern European small town (*shtetl*) or North African ghetto (*mellah*). Whatever Moses looked like, he certainly did not look like a nineteenth century Polish Hasid. Whatever Jews of the biblical and talmudic period ate, it was not gefilte fish or falafel. The little tradition seems much more recent, more folksy, less exalted, more down to earth. You can see the difference even in language—between Hebrew, the language of text, and the various spoken languages of the Jews. This is expressed in Yiddish by the way in which both languages are labeled. Hebrew is *loshn koydesh*, or the Holy Language, but Yiddish is *mame loshn*, or the mother tongue.

Sometimes it is hard to see the connection between the two types of tradition. How does the religion and ethos of the Bible turn into the religion and the ethos of the nineteenth century Diaspora? In this book I will trace some of the historic stages that led from the earliest periods of Jewish history to the very different recent patterns. I will look at how Jews moved from their homeland to the

various lands in which they settled. I will compare the various local traditions and look at how they fit together in similar structures despite their differences. But in the end, there will be many aspects of the folk tradition whose relationship to ancient Jewish roots cannot be documented. A telling example of the tenuous connection between modern Jewishness and the Jewishness of the Bible is furnished by genealogy. It is a firm part of the faith of most Jews that they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the blessings for Chanukah, for instance, all recite the words "who has done miracles *for our ancestors* in those days at this season." Yet, it is virtually impossible for any Jew researching a family tree to go back further than a few hundred years. Almost all Jews except recent converts can connect themselves directly to a specific little tradition, whether Yemenite, Eastern European, or Persian, but almost no one can prove that their ancestors really were biblical Israelites. Their descent has to be taken on faith.

But it is not origin alone that makes a person or a cultural trait Jewish. Even a cultural practice whose origin is demonstrably not Jewish can be Jewish to the core because it performs a Jewish function. When one culture borrows an element from another culture, it can do so in one of two ways: It can assimilate to the outside culture by taking on characteristics of the other culture in order to become a part of its society; alternatively, it can incorporate a feature of an outside culture into its own culture and make it its own. Traditional Judaism was highly adept at the second process—borrowing and "Judaizing" traits belonging to the people among whom the Jews lived. Considering only their origins, Yiddish is primarily a Germanic language, borsht is a Russian food, some Hasidic tunes are Ukrainian shepherds' songs, and the hora is a Romanian dance. But when a culture adopts a practice from another culture, it gives the practice a function within its own culture that changes its meaning. If Jews take a Polish or Moroccan Berber food and associate it with a particular Jewish holiday observance, the food becomes a Jewish food. When a Hasid today wears a fur hat that may be the same as hats worn by Polish noblemen of the seventeenth century, he is not wearing a Polish hat; he is wearing a Hasidic costume. In adopting foreign traits, Jews have changed the meaning (a shepherd's melody becomes a religious tune), the form (a German, Polish, or Arab food has its recipe changed to make it

kosher; an Arabic amulet acquires a Hebrew inscription), or the function (a Mardi Gras food becomes a Purim food). Very often a practice that the Jews originally borrowed from their neighbors becomes Jewish because non-Jews stop practicing it, or Jews migrate to a new country where no one but Jews practice it.

Often cultural traits that have different origins and different appearances are tied together by a common function. A good example is the Jewish Sabbath lunch food in various parts of the world. The names differ, the basic ingredients differ, and therefore the tastes differ greatly. But these dishes share the common characteristic that they can simmer slowly for many hours overnight. They therefore fulfill the common function of obeying the Jewish tradition requiring warm food on the Sabbath but forbidding cooking (except where the process began before sundown on Friday). Accordingly, these foods are functionally the same, even though their outward characteristics are different. Something similar can be said about the relationship between the Ashkenazic Jewish name Katz and the Italian Jewish name Sacerdote, which don't sound alike but both mean Cohen or Jewish priest. These examples can be multiplied by the hundreds. It could be predicted that any local Jewish culture will have certain items—a Sabbath food, a way of covering the Torah, a method of Torah cantillation, a melody or chant for Kol Nidre—but how that item will taste, look, or sound, remains unpredictable.

Because the little tradition was not written down but had to be learned by word of mouth, it varied from place to place. Members of Jewish communities only knew the folk traditions that they themselves had seen. They incorrectly assumed that the way things were done in their town was the way things were done throughout the Jewish world. But in other parts of the world with which they had no personal contact, different local traditions developed from the same written great tradition. As long as the bearers of local traditions did not encounter each other in person, they could not influence each other.

The more stationary a population, the more isolated its local traditions. But the Jews as a group were less sedentary than their neighbors, who were mostly farmers. Many of them were merchants who traveled large distances on business and came into contact with people from other regions. Therefore Jewish local

traditions never developed in total isolation; although each community had its own nuances, local traditions generally resembled those of communities in nearby towns. Jewish little traditions often stretched over large areas. This was especially true because the Jewish population also migrated, sometimes over large distances, taking traditions born in one region to new areas where conditions were totally different.

The result of Jewish migrations and Jewish business travel was neither total uniformity of Jewish customs around the world nor extreme local variation. Instead Jewish little traditions were regional, often covering large areas but still remaining markedly different from one cultural region to another. In later chapters, about a dozen Jewish cultural regions will be described, each of which can be broken down into subregions with more subtle differences among them.

Cultural Boundaries

Students of linguistics and ethnography (the studies of languages and culture) have developed the idea of the cultural boundary, which scholars refer to as "isoglosses" or "isopleths." They generally theorize that sharp cultural boundaries or bundles of isoglosses are evidence of communications barriers. So, if a mountain range separates two groups of people, their dialects differ because the range greatly restricted personal contact between people on either side of the mountains. Instead, the people near the mountains are in closer contact with the valleys on their side of the range. Other communications barriers might be oceans, rivers, forests or political boundaries.

The various Jewish cultures are an interesting check on the theory of communications barriers. Because Jews were almost always in the minority in their places of residence, they shared the same territory with another culture and sometimes with more than one culture. If a mountain range or river was a communications barrier, it would be expected to perform the same function for both Jews and non-Jews. If, as is frequently the case, the geographical patterns

within Jewish culture are not the same as those of the non-Jews living in the same area, an important question about communications barriers is raised. It is not that such barriers had no effect on Jewish culture, but rather that different factors were communications barriers for Jews than for non-Jews.

A political boundary might have had no effect on non-Jewish cultural communications, but it could have been a barrier to Jews who were not allowed to cross the frontier. A river that served as a barrier to non-Jewish communications might be no barrier at all to itinerant Jewish merchants who crossed the river frequently. Differences in settlement history might also create different patterns. A certain area might have been settled very late by the Jewish population (or alternatively, the Jews from the area could have been expelled). Because of this, when Jews did settle in the area, they came from both sides of the previously "uninhabited areas" and the isoglosses all crossed the "new territory." This is the reason, for instance, that the main cultural boundaries among Jews in Germany before World War II divided the east from the west. By contrast, the main cultural boundaries among German non-Jews divided the north from the south.

It is the nature of the development of tradition that oral culture can become fixed once it is written down. In the course of Jewish history the codified practices constantly grew in number and importance. Many a practice that began as a folk practice could end up as a part of the written law, such as the bar mitzvah, or the Ashkenazic prohibition on eating beans on Passover. Once something became a part of the written tradition, available in books, it was much less likely to disappear than were practices that were merely part of the oral little tradition. Such written practices were probably more likely to spread than those that no one thought worthy of writing down.

Reasons for Local Variations

Although more and more practices were codified as written laws, it was impossible for all practices to be written down. Without a system of Western notation,

Jewish liturgical music could not be put into a fixed written form. Its performance would always depend on traditions passed down orally. Patterns of dress were also not easily recorded in writing. One might prohibit a particular item (perhaps luxurious clothes that were considered improper or that showed too much of the human body to outsiders) and require another article of clothing (for instance, a hair covering for married women), but it was impossible to codify every detail of dress. Color, cut, type of material, style of embroidery or sewing, and types of ornaments were too complicated to prescribe in a law code. Even if they were prescribed, it was almost impossible to enforce so many details. The same pattern is true of Jewish food customs. Certain items or combinations could be forbidden or required, but it was impossible to prescribe an exact recipe. Even if an item of clothing or a festive food had the same name in two different places, it was not necessarily the same.

Other local variations in the tradition resulted from the conditions prevailing in different lands. The foods eaten by a particular cultural group depended largely on the availability of various staples. In premodern times, the group was generally restricted to foodstuffs grown in the immediate surroundings. The foods of Jews in a cold climate would necessarily differ from those living in a subtropical area. Jews, like all other inhabitants, would be affected by whether the main grain of their region was rye, wheat, or rice and by what fruits or vegetables were available on the market. The languages that Jews spoke among themselves were largely influenced by the languages their neighbors spoke. Sometimes they picked up a version of their neighbors' language and sometimes they brought a spoken language, such as Yiddish or Ladino, from a previous migration. But even in the latter case, they adopted all sorts of words, phrases, and grammatical forms from the languages spoken around them.

This book will concentrate on those aspects of Jewish tradition and culture not found in the Holy Books. It will deal specifically with the little traditions. This exploration does not intend merely to list variations demonstrating that there was much diversity within Judaism. That seems obvious. Instead, this book attempts to look at the geographic differences in Jewish tradition in a comparative

way. Exploring common functions and different forms in music, costume, language, religious rites, and names, this book will trace the stages of migration that have created the various Jewish folk traditions and will look at the cultures that have influenced these traditions. Although this book will contain a great deal of description of specific items of food, clothing, and ritual, I will link them to the basic analytic themes of this study:

1. The great tradition as outline and the little tradition as content
2. The interplay between common function and different origins
3. Similarities and differences between Jews and their neighbors
4. The relationship between outside cultural and natural forces (like climate) and internal belief systems

All of these subthemes will help to answer the basic question raised by the material to be explored: Why are Jews in different countries so similar to and so different from one another, and why are they so similar to and so different from their non-Jewish neighbors?

Regional Cultures

From Jerusalem to Spain, Poland, and Morocco:

The Influence of Jewish Migrations

Introduction: The Chief Regional Jewish Cultures

For over 2500 years, Jewish life has been marked by the coexistence of a Jewish national homeland in the Land of Israel and a Diaspora (the Greek word for "dispersion") outside the homeland. For most of these centuries, the Jewish population of the dispersion far outnumbered those in the "center," and they often had greater influence on world Jewish life than did Israel. Sometimes Jewish life in

the Jewish homeland was virtually nonexistent—for instance, after the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099. The Jews were dispersed to many lands and came into contact with many different peoples, climates, languages, and ways of life.

Jews were not the only dispersed people in the world. Others included the Armenians, the Parsees (Zoroastrians in India), the overseas Chinese, and the Gypsies. Except perhaps for the Gypsies, none were quite as dispersed as the Jews. Like other migrants, Jews moved from one place to another for one of two reasons. They were attracted (pulled) to a new land by economic opportunity, adventure, and a chance to start anew, or they were escaping (pushed) from an old country because of religious persecution, financial hardship, warfare, or general chaos. Sometimes push and pull combined to motivate Jews to change location.

To understand how Jews got from Jerusalem to such distant places as Krakow, Poland, Kaifeng, China, and Gondar, Ethiopia, we have to look both at the history of the Jews and at the history and cultures of the peoples among whom they ended up living. In the early part of the story, military conquests and invasions play an important role. In later times, persecutions and economic opportunity are often more important. Throughout the story, long periods of stability alternated with periods of rapid change. Sometimes Jews were very open to the new cultures they came into contact with and rapidly learned their languages, customs, and habits. At other times they seemed to hang on tenaciously to the culture of the Old Country (whatever the Old Country happened to be) and avoided becoming like the peoples among whom they lived.

At the end of over 2000 years of wandering, Jews found themselves scattered over a wide area with many different local cultures, but the range of their dispersion was not unlimited. Jews did not go everywhere (at least not until very recently), nor were they influenced by all the cultures of the world. There were no Jews before the nineteenth century in central and southern Africa, Japan, Indochina, Siberia, Ireland, Australia, or Scandinavia (except for Denmark). Only a tiny number settled in the Americas before 1800.

Before beginning a historical outline of how the Jews got to where they ended up living, a quick survey of the main geographic and cultural areas in which Jews lived is in order. Often people speak of Ashkenazic (northern Euro-

pean) and Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jews, but this distinction is much too simple to explain all the various Jewish traditions.

We can draw a kind of "family tree" of the various descendants of ancient Judaism (Table 2.1). Some of these descendants, like Christianity of course, have ceased to be part of Judaism and will not be dealt with in this book. Others, which will be addressed, branched off from the rabbinic Judaism that became the normative Jewish tradition. Some of these nonrabbinic Jews, like the Samaritans, were already a separate group during the time of the Second Temple (Time Line), but others, like the Karaites, separated in the Middle Ages over 1000 years later. The Samaritans and Karaites continued to use the Bible and other holy books in Hebrew, but two other nonrabbinic Jewish groups, the Bene Israel of India and the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, forgot (or never learned) the Hebrew language.

The distinction between rabbinic and nonrabbinic Jews is the most basic subdivision of the Jewish people in premodern times. By comparison with the groups just mentioned, the rabbinic Jews shared many things: the Hebrew language, the basic structure of the prayer book, the same holidays, and the same structure of Jewish religious law. Still there was plenty of room for local and regional differences. There are alternative ways of classifying the major subdivisions of the rabbinic Jews. They can be divided by (1) traditions of Hebrew pronunciation, prayer book liturgy, and liturgical music; (2) spoken traditional Jewish language; or (3) settlement history. These classifications overlap to some extent but also show important differences. The most profound divisions based on our first criterion are three: Ashkenazic, Sephardic-Oriental, and Yemenite (Map 2.1). These three cultural groups and their major traits will be explained in the following chapter. There are many subgroups within the three divisions, some of them fairly substantial. As will be shown later, the Jews of Italy form a kind of transitional group between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic-Oriental groups.

When it comes to grouping by traditional vernacular language, the divisions are more complicated than a three-way split. In order to follow the complicated divisions and subdivisions, it will be helpful to look at Map 2.2. No fewer than nine main groups of Jewish languages spoken by rabbinic Jews survived into modern times (and a few more became extinct before then). Most of these

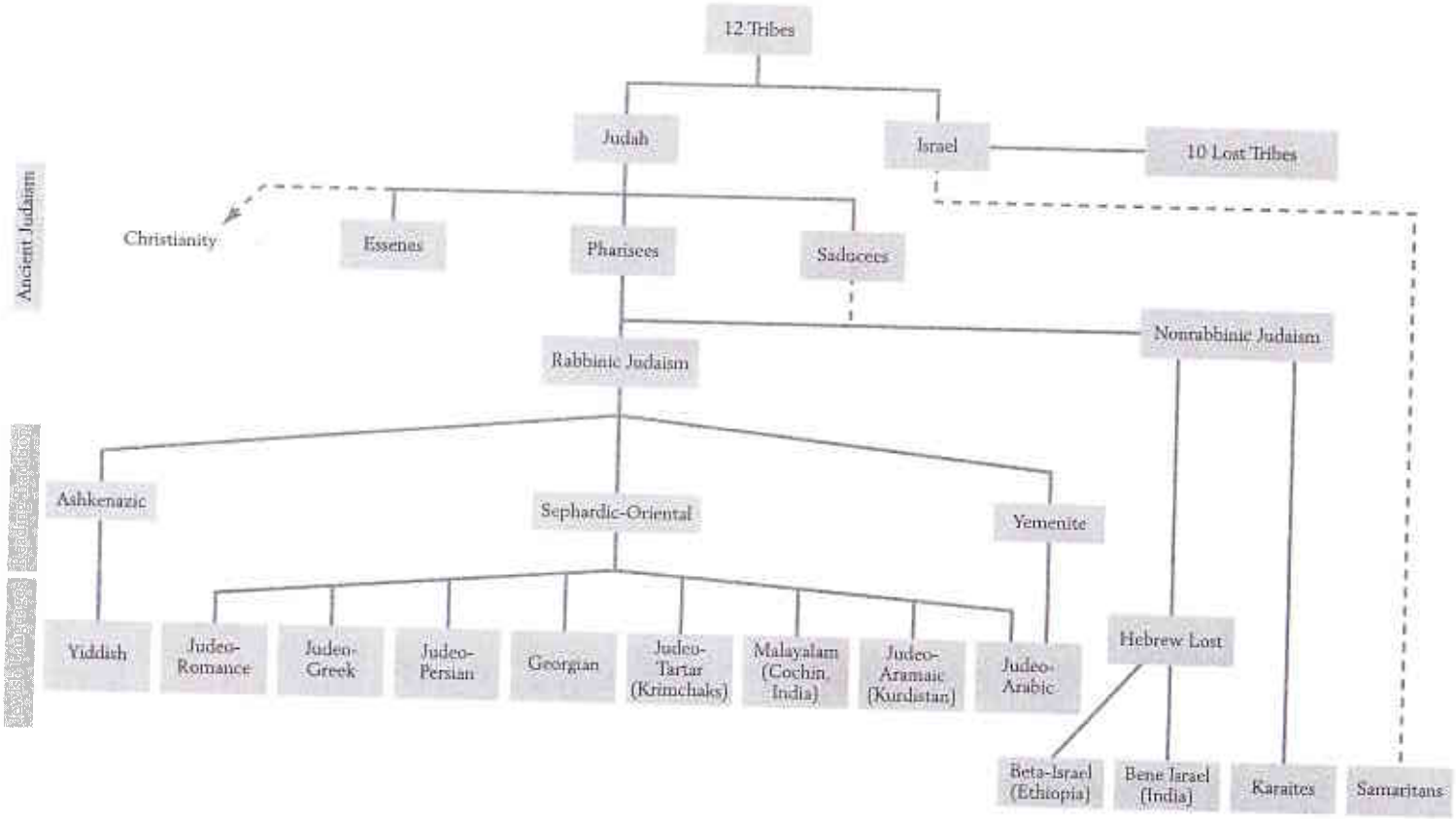

Table 2.1a Genealogy of Chief Jewish Cultural Groups

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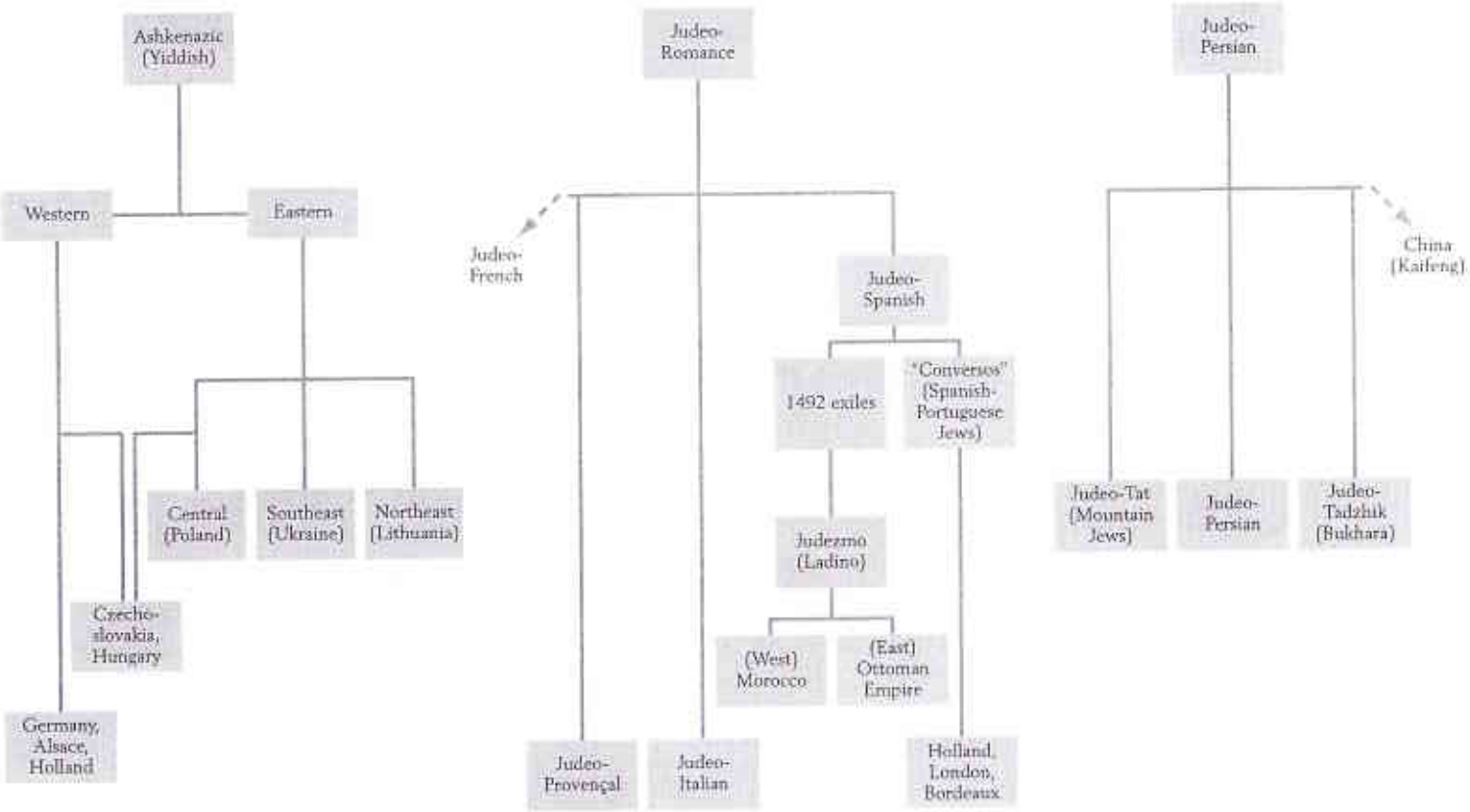
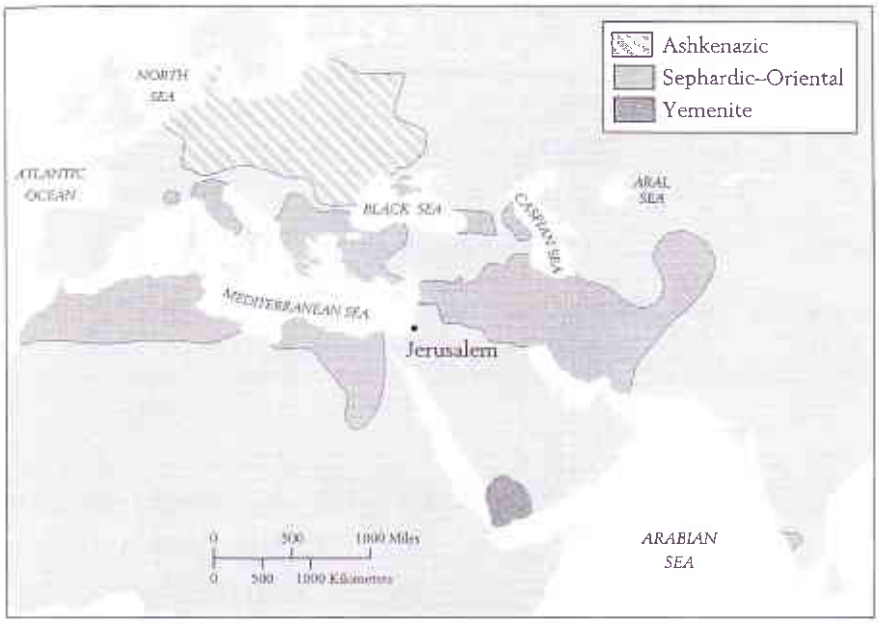


Table 2.1b Subdivisions of Jewish language groups

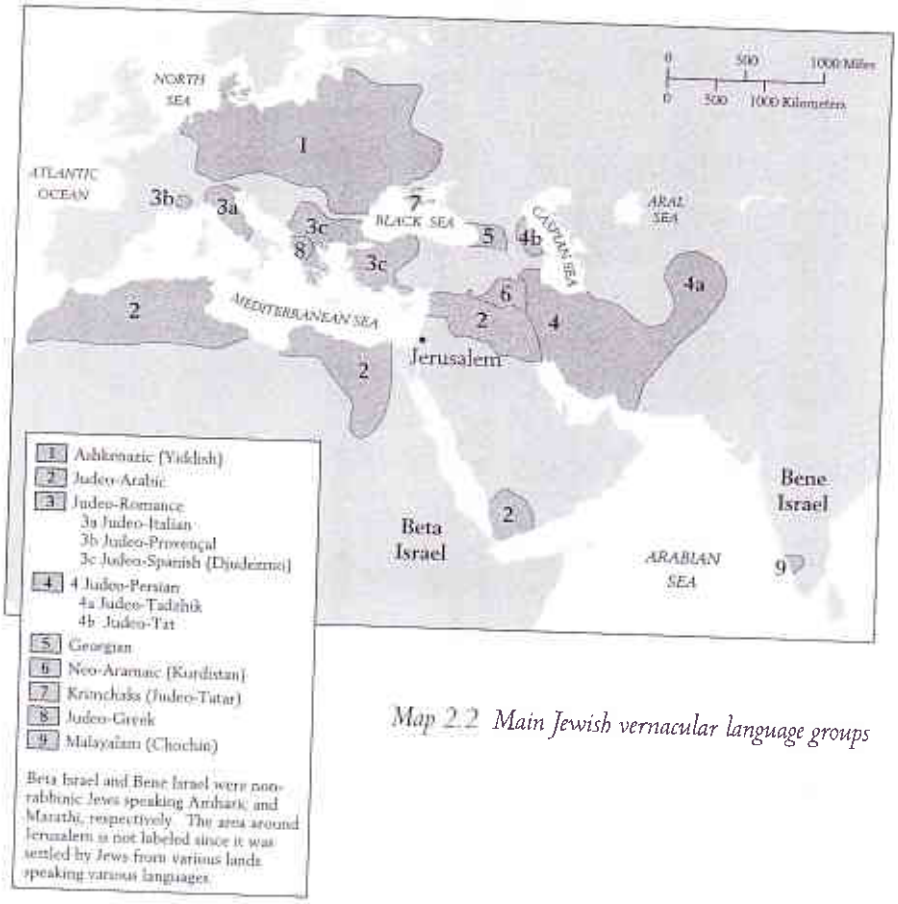
	Political History	*Migration History*
1800	1772–1795 Partitions of Poland	
1700		
1600	1569 Union of Lublin between Poland and Lithuania	
1500	1492 Expulsion of Jews from Spain	1450–1550 Main period of Ashkenazic migration to Eastern Europe
1400		
1300		
1200		
1100		
1000		
900		First Ashkenazic Jews
800		
700	711 Muslim conquest of Spain	Conversion of Khazars to Judaism
600	Founding of Islam	Beginning of Karaite movement
500	476 Fall of Roman Empire	
400		
300	312 Christianization of Roman Empire	
200		
100 CE		
0	70 Destruction of Second Temple	Beginning of Christianity
100 BCE	63 Roman conquest of Judea	Beginning of Jewish settlement in Roman Empire
200	168–165 Maccabee revolt against the Greeks	146 Beginning of Roman conquest of Greek lands
300	333 Alexander the Great conquers the Persians	Beginning of Jewish contact with Greek culture (Hellenism)
400		Samaritans separate from Jews
500	515 Second Temple building completed	Beginning of Iranian Jewry
600	538 Babylonians conquered by Persians 587 Jerusalem conquered by Babylonians	Beginning of Iraqi Jewry
700	721 Northern Kingdom of Israel conquered by Assyrians	"Ten Lost Tribes"
800		



Map 2.1 Main traditions of Hebrew pronunciation

groups have further subdivisions. The approximate order of size, from largest to smallest, during the nineteenth century was:

1. Ashkenazic Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, whose traditional language, Yiddish, was mainly Germanic in origin. Around 1900 they numbered over 10 million.
2. Approximately 470,000 Jews speaking various types of Judeo-Arabic. One subgroup, the Jews of Yemen, had traditions that differed greatly from those of the others. Other Arabic-speaking Jews were to be found in almost every Arabic-speaking country (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) except Sudan, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.
3. Jews speaking languages of Romance origin. The best-known group among these were the approximately 400,000 Sephardim who spoke a language of mainly Spanish origin. After their expulsion from Spain, Jews carried this Judeo-Spanish language (which was also known as Djudezmo or Ladino) to the Turkish Empire (what is now Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Bosnia,



Map 2.2 Main Jewish vernacular language groups

Macedonia, and Serbia). Others settled in Morocco. Later, former Conversos, that is, Jews who had converted to Christianity at least outwardly, escaped from Spain and Portugal and settled in Amsterdam, London, Hamburg, Bordeaux, and other Western European ports.

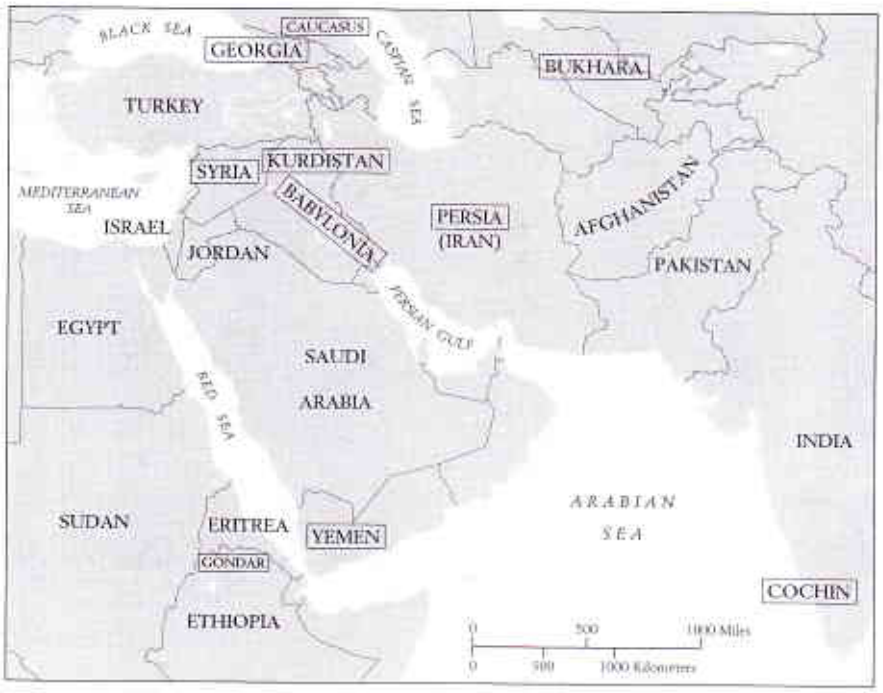
A less well known group was the ancient Jewish community of Italy, numbering some 45,000, which has survived to this day. The Judeo-French-speaking community disappeared after the medieval expulsions of Jews from France, but a small group of Jews speaking Judeo-Provençal survived in the area around the southern French town of Avignon up to the early twentieth century.

4. Approximately 90,000 Jews speaking languages of Persian origin. Besides the Jews of Iran, these included the Bukharan Jews, the "Mountain Jews" in the Caucasus Mountains in parts of the former Soviet Union, and the Jews of Afghanistan. The now-extinct Jewish community of medieval China was also descended from this group.
5. About 20,000 Georgian-speaking Jews in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia.
6. The 10,000–15,000 Aramaic-speaking Jews of Kurdistan in northern Iraq.
7. The 3500 or so Krimchaks, rabbinic Jews living on the now Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, who spoke a Tatar language.
8. From 3000 to 5000 Jews in the Yanina region (Epirus) of northern Greece who spoke a Jewish dialect of Greek, unlike the other Greek Jews, who spoke Judeo-Spanish (see group 3).
9. From 1500 to 2000 Jews of Cochin in southern India, who spoke an Indian language (Malayalam).

As will become clear in the following chapter, Jews sometimes spoke their own version of the language of their non-Jewish neighbors and sometimes spoke a language totally different from (and incomprehensible to) the non-Jews.

Migration History

Migrations played a large role in creating the subdivisions outlined above. In most cases, the migration history helps to explain the linguistic patterns of the various Jewish groups, but sometimes groups of Jews changed languages even when they did not migrate. Because so many migrations happened over so long a period of time, this summary will be very rapid (covering about 200 years or more per page in places). Again the narrative is accompanied by maps and time lines. First, we will refer mainly to the map of Asia (Map 2.3).



Map 2.3 Jewish settlement areas in Asia

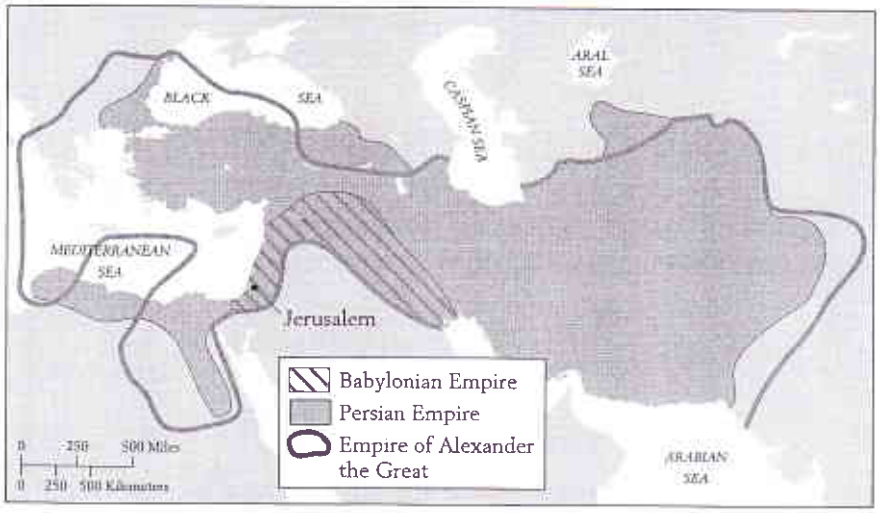
The story of the Jewish Diaspora begins in the year 587 BCE, when the Judean kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians, who destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. A large proportion of the Jewish population of Judea was exiled from the land and taken by force to Babylonia (what is now the southern part of Iraq). Jewish settlement in Iraq continued uninterruptedly from the time of this first exile until the years immediately following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, when most of the Iraqi Jews emigrated to Israel.

There were Jews in Iraq long before it was an Arab country or a Muslim one. The ancient Babylonians spoke an ancient Semitic language called Akkadian (and later Chaldean); their religion was polytheistic. Later the Aramaic language (originally the language of Syria) became the official language of Babylonia and the entire eastern Mediterranean. It wasn't until the Arab conquest of the seventh century (1200 years after the arrival of the first Jews) that the population of Iraq learned Arabic and adopted the Muslim religion.

Actually the Babylonian exile was not the first exile of the Israelites. First there was the Israelite slavery in Egypt mentioned in the Bible. Later the Israelite kingdom of David and Solomon was divided between the north (Israel, with its capital in Samaria) and south (Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem). The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians of northern Iraq in 721 BCE and its population deported. What became of the deportees of the northern kingdom, no one knows. Referred to as the Ten Lost Tribes, they have been the subject of countless legends, but no real ascertainable facts.

The Assyrian exile also created a second subgroup of Israelites. It was Assyrian policy to deport residents of various provinces they conquered and mix them together with the old native populations in order to make it more difficult for the conquered nations to rebel. When the Ten Lost Tribes were deported to Assyria, some of the populations of other areas in the Assyrian Empire were brought to the conquered area around Samaria. Later known as the Samaritans, these people eventually converted to a form of Judaism but were not accepted by the main body of Jews who returned to build the Second Temple in Jerusalem (see below). Among their differences from other Israelites were their rejection of Jerusalem as the site of the Holy Temple and their use of a different Hebrew alphabet and a different calendar. While they consider themselves descendants of the ancient Israelites, they are called Cuthim in the Talmud, implying that they are non-Jews from Cutha in southern Iraq. Once there were many thousand Samaritans, but today only a few hundred survive—in Nablus on the West Bank and in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv.

Returning to the fate of the Judean exiles in Babylonia, tradition says that their exile lasted only 70 years. But even before the 70 years were up, the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians under King Cyrus (538 BCE). The Persian Empire was much larger than the Babylonian Empire had ever been; as the Book of Esther says, it ruled "from [the border of] India to [the border of] Ethiopia." It controlled the whole of what is now the east coast of the Mediterranean, including much of today's Turkey, as well as Iraq, today's Iran, areas of what was Soviet Central Asia, and even Egypt (Map 2.4). In the western part of their empire the Persians used Aramaic as their official language, and in the eastern part they used Persian (a non-Semitic Indo-European language).



Map 2.4 Boundaries of ancient empires

Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and, over the next century and a half, waves of Jewish migrants returned. But the majority of the Jews remained in their new homes in Babylonia and in other parts of the Persian Empire. The Persian-speaking Jews of Iran, like the Jews of Iraq, could look back on 2500 years of uninterrupted Jewish settlement.

The Aramaic language, which was the official language of the western half of the Persian Empire, had a tremendous influence on the Jews. The Jewish prayer book contains a number of prayers in Aramaic, most notably the Kaddish. Some of the most important religious works of rabbinic Judaism, including the Talmud, were written in the Aramaic language.

The next major change in Jewish migrations again resulted from the conquest of the empire in which the Jews lived. In 333 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia overthrew the Persian Empire and established a Greek-dominated empire of his own. Though, shortly after his death, the empire splintered into a number of warring kingdoms, the Greek influence, known as Hellenism, became dominant throughout the areas which Alexander had conquered. As in earlier

The influence of various offshoots of the Persian language were not limited to the areas that are part of Iran today. To the northwest of today's Iran, in what is now the Russian region of Daghestan and in the northern part of formerly Soviet Azerbaijan, lived the "Mountain Jews." Living in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains, they were unusual among world Jewry because, like their Christian and Muslim neighbors, they were armed and wore shirts with bandoleers containing ammunition (Illustration 2.1). Jews seem to have arrived in the region in the fifth and sixth Christian eras from Persia. Their language, Judeo-Tat, was related to the dialects of non-Jewish Tats living in the same region, but not necessarily in the same towns, as them.

2.1. Group of armed mountain Jews from the Caucasus, with pockets for cartridges on their chests.

To the northeast of Iran lived the Bukharan Jews. In the Middle Ages these Jews were concentrated in the city of Bukhara, which was the capital of an emirate of the same name. In the nineteenth century they spread to many of the major cities of Uzbekistan, including Samarkand and Tashkent, and neighboring areas. A language closely related to Persian, called Tadzhik, was spoken by many Muslims in Central Asia, especially in what is now known as Tadzhikistan in the former Soviet Union. The Bukharan Jews spoke a version of the Tadzhik language even though they lived mainly among Muslims who spoke Uzbek, a language related to Turkish but not to Persian. In present-day Afghanistan there were also Jews who spoke Judeo-Persian. Finally, sometime in the Middle Ages, a group of Persian-speaking Jews migrated to Kaifeng in central China. We know this because the instructions in their prayer books were in Judeo-Persian. Even though, by the fifteenth century, they were physically indistinguishable from the Chinese, their language and liturgy show that they were an offshoot of Iranian-speaking Jewry.

Among the Jews in the Persian Empire whom we know spoke Aramaic were a strange colony of Jews at Elephantine in Upper Egypt. At the time of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem some Jews fled to Egypt, taking the biblical prophet Jeremiah with them against his will. About 150 to 200 years later (at the end of the fifth century BCE), a colony of Jewish soldiers in the Persian army wrote a series of documents and letters in Aramaic that have been preserved. These texts show that they had a temple with sacrifices at Elephantine (despite the biblical prohibition of temples outside of Jerusalem), celebrated Passover, and, it seems, honored several Canaanite goddesses along with the Jewish God.

conquests, the Jews reacted to the conquest by learning a new language and by spreading throughout the conquering empire.

The influence of the Greek culture on the Jews was at least as great as the influence of Aramaic culture. Hellenistic culture was different from other conquering cultures in the ancient Near East because it claimed to be universal and therefore open to (and right for) everyone. This brought Hellenism—in its most extreme form—into conflict with Judaism, the only other national culture in the area with claims of universalism, as can be seen in the famous Chanukah story. When Jewish Hellenists imposed Greek religious rituals on the Temple in Jerusalem and the "Syrian Greek" ruler, part of the Seleucid dynasty, one of the successors of Alexander the Great, forbade many Jewish rites, the Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, revolted against the Greeks in 167 BCE. Not only did they recapture the Temple and cleanse it of Hellenistic influences, but they eventually reestablished Jewish independence. The independent Jewish kingdom, ruled by the descendants of the Maccabee family (the Hasmonean dynasty), remained in existence for about 80 years, from c. 140 to 63 BCE.

Hellenism and Judaism were not merely in conflict; they also influenced each other tremendously. Jews, living in cities dominated by Greek culture scattered throughout the eastern Mediterranean, organized themselves in self-governing communities within the Greek city-states. There they came into contact with

many competing philosophies and religions. In this competition the Jews stood out as different for several reasons. Their gathering places, *synagogues* (a Greek word), had neither images of the gods nor animal sacrifices. Their ancient holy book, the Bible, was soon translated into Greek as the Septuagint and became available to educated non-Jews as well as Jews. Because the Bible was available in Greek, large Jewish communities developed whose main, perhaps only, language was Greek and who may not have known Hebrew. The translation of the Bible also resulted in large numbers of non-Jews becoming interested in Judaism, some of whom converted to Judaism and others of whom remained sympathizing "God fearers." In this Diaspora environment, an interpretation of Judaism arose that tried to reconcile it with the dominant culture of the Greeks. Out of this mixed culture emerged not only much of today's Judaism but also early Christianity.

The Greek cultural influence remained dominant over much of the Mediterranean area for centuries, but Greek political influence did not last nearly as long. Within 200 years of Alexander's conquest, the Greek world fell under the military and political domination of the Romans. At first the Jews, who had regained their independence, welcomed the Romans as allies against the Greeks. But after the Greeks were conquered, the Romans turned to Judea and occupied it in 63 BCE. One hundred thirty years later, in 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, and in the ensuing centuries the Jewish population of what the Romans called Palestine declined steadily.

Jews who were displaced by force or who voluntarily left their homeland joined Jews already in the Greek cities to settle within the rest of the Roman Empire. Jews have lived in the city of Rome uninterruptedly since the time of Julius Caesar, over 100 years before the destruction of the Second Temple. Many Romans of good families converted to Judaism, and by one estimate (probably exaggerated), one of every ten inhabitants of the Roman Empire was a Jew. Jews were found all over the Empire: in what are now Syria, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, Libya, Morocco, Spain, Italy, the former Yugoslavia, Hungary, France, and even far-off Germany. The Jewish catacombs, or underground cemeteries, which were discovered in Rome and other places, show that many Jews were assimilated into non-Jewish culture. Their tombstones were usually in Greek (the language of the

Old Country before Rome) rather than in Hebrew (some Jewish inscriptions were also in Latin), though they often had Jewish symbols or the Hebrew word *shalom* in a corner (Illustration 2.2).

The Roman Empire continued to dominate the Mediterranean world for centuries, maintaining order, establishing trade, and uniting much of the Western world. But the Empire began to change and then to decline. The Christians, formerly a despised Jewish sect, became the dominant religion among the urban population and, around 312 CE, the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Meanwhile, Rome had an increasingly difficult time fighting off the Hun, Germanic, and other barbaric tribes pressing in on its north. At the end of the fifth century CE, the Germanic Goths, Vandals, Franks, and others conquered the Empire and divided its western half into various tribal kingdoms. The eastern half remained a Greek-speaking "Roman" empire with its capital in Byzantium (later called Constantinople, now Istanbul) until the fifteenth century.

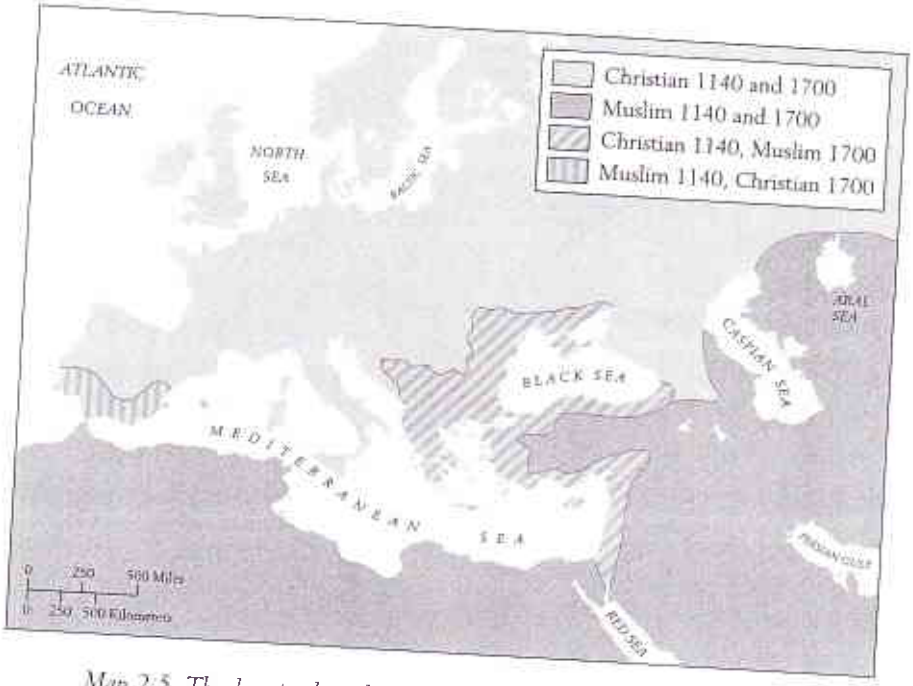
2.2 Tombstone from Jewish catacombs in Rome in Greek and Latin. Note the Jewish symbols and the Hebrew word "shalom" at the bottom.

After the destruction of the Roman Empire, we can summarize the geographic spread of the Jewish people more or less as follows. The Jews of northern Europe (Germany, northern France, and Hungary) disappear from sight. It is not known whether they fled, were killed, or continued to live there without leaving any records. In the parts of the former Roman Empire nearest the Mediterranean, Jewish communities survived in today's North Africa, Spain, southern France, and Italy, as well as in the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) areas of Egypt, Syria, Greece, and Turkey, where Greek influence remained strong. Outside the former Roman Empire there were many Jews in today's Iraq and Iran, and some were scattered in other parts of Western and Central Asia.

In the seventh century, another worldwide force came into existence and conquered a large part of the Western world—the Muslims. The Islamic religion began in Arabia when Mohammed came into contact with Jews and Christians living in the area. This monotheistic religion, whose teachings are preserved in the Koran, taught the faithful that it was their duty to spread the Muslim religion throughout the world, by the sword if necessary. At the time of Muhammed's death in 632 CE, Islam was still confined mainly to the area of the Arabian Peninsula. But less than 80 years later, it had conquered most of the lands of the Byzantine Empire (Palestine, Syria, Egypt), taken over the former Persian Empire, swept across North Africa, and captured nearly all of Spain.

The Muslim conquest divided the Western world into two parts. The areas north and west of the Mediterranean remained mostly Christian, and the areas to the south and east became mostly Muslim. In almost all of the Muslim world west of Iran, the Arabic language slowly replaced the former native languages Aramaic, Greek, and Coptic (ancient Egyptian). A huge Arab-speaking area with a common language and culture, many trade opportunities, and an advanced culture brought all populations under its rule into contact with each other (Map 2.5)

Jewish life and settlement patterns were profoundly affected by the Muslim conquest. In what is now Saudi Arabia, the spread of Islam meant the expulsion of the Jewish population. The only Jews left in the Arabian Peninsula were in the south (the Arabic word for south is Yemen). The Yemenite Jews who had arrived on the peninsula centuries before (no one knows exactly when) now found themselves hundreds of miles from their nearest Jewish neighbors (in Egypt, Iraq, or Syria), which probably explains why their traditions were distinctively different from those of other rabbinic Jews. In other parts of the Muslim world, Jews were permitted to live as "protected people" or "people of the book" with second-class status. Indeed, in some areas, such as Spain, where Jews had been persecuted under Christian (Visigoth) rule, the Arab conquest meant a new chance at religious freedom. Throughout the Arab world, Jews traded with each other, migrated from region to region, and remained in contact by correspondence and by reading each other's works. Slowly over the centuries, the Jews of



Map 2.5 The changing boundary between the Christian and Mulsim world

these countries, like their Christian and Muslim neighbors, began to use the Arabic language as their regular means of communication. Even works of Jewish religious philosophy like Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* were written in Arabic (though in Hebrew letters).

There was one important exception to the victory of Arabic over the former spoken languages. In northern Iraq is the region called Kurdistan. The majority of the Muslims there spoke (and continue to speak) Kurdish, a language related to Persian. But some of the Christians and most of the Jews in that region stayed with a version of the old spoken Aramaic language of the region. (The Jewish version is usually called Targumic or Neo-Aramaic, and the Christian version is called Assyrian or Chaldaic.)

Before turning back to the Jews of Europe, we should discuss the origins of the remaining Jewish groups in Asia and Africa, which we have not yet referred to.

Already mentioned are the Mountain Jews living in the northern and eastern

foothills of the Caucasus Mountains and speaking the Tat Iranian language. Across the mountains on the southern and western sides was the ancient Christian kingdom of Georgia (Gruzia). Jews have lived among the Georgians for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Although not far away from the Mountain Jews in terms of miles, they were totally separated from them by the high mountains (at least until the nineteenth century). In their traditions and language they were quite different from the Tat-speaking Mountain Jews. Like their Christian neighbors these Jews spoke Georgian, a language related neither to Persian nor to Arabic nor to any Indo-European or Semitic language.

To the north and west of Georgia, at the northern end of the Black Sea, lies the Crimean peninsula. This area has gone through many conquests and changes of culture during its history. Its native peoples were first colonized by the ancient Greeks, who were followed by the Goths, the Khazars, and the Turkic-speaking Tatars. Since the Muslim Tatars were expelled after World War II, the area is now inhabited mainly by Ukrainians and Russians. Jewish settlement

It was in the Muslim world that a major sect broke away from rabbinic Judaism in the eighth century. Founded by Anan ben David, a member of a distinguished Iraqi Jewish family, this sect came to be known as the Karaites, a name derived from a Hebrew word that referred to the written Bible. The Karaites rejected the Talmud and the oral tradition and developed their own practices, which differed in many ways from those of the rabbinic Jews. The Karaites later spread east to Persia and west to other Muslim-controlled areas such as Palestine and Egypt. In the Middle Ages the Karaite centers shifted into what is today's Turkey, and in early modern times new Karaite centers developed in the Crimea and in scattered parts of Eastern Europe. In the Crimea and Eastern Europe the Karaites spoke a Tatar language, while in Egypt they spoke Arabic. The Karaites of Eastern Europe and the Crimea have now generally assimilated. The bulk of the Karaites of Egypt migrated to Israel, where they form the main surviving Karaite community of about 7000.

in the Crimea seems to have gone through the same cultural changes as the general population. The first Jews probably came with the Greeks almost 2000 years ago and were part of Jewish-Hellenistic culture. During the Khazar period, many Jews fleeing persecution in the Byzantine Empire seem to have come to the Crimea; there were also later Jewish settlers from Italy and Spain. The rabbinic Jewish population of the Crimea in the nineteenth century were known as the Krimchaks. They spoke a Tatar language that had some resemblances to the language of the Karaites, who also lived in the Crimea in large numbers. The Nazis persecuted the Krimchaks as Jews while leaving the Karaites alone.

Just as the Crimea had two separate Jewish populations, Karaites and Krimchaks, the far-off subcontinent of India also had two (and later three) distinct Jewish populations. Though there were tens of thousands of Jews in India, they were invisible among the hundreds of millions of Indians. Unlike virtually all other traditional Jewish settlements (China being the other exception), those in India were not located mainly among Muslims or Christians. Perhaps because of the small numbers of Jews and their lack of connection to the native religions of India, there was little or no anti-Jewish feeling in India. The two oldest Jewish groups in India were the Bene Israel, residing mainly in the area around Bombay, and the Cochin Jews, living chiefly in the city of the same name in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

The origin of the Bene Israel is shrouded in mystery. Their traditions speak of a shipwreck of Jews on the Indian coast, of their progressive forgetting of their traditions and of their reattachment to Jewish tradition through the teaching of David Rahabi in ancient times. (Historians now think Rahabi lived in the eighteenth century rather than hundreds of years earlier, as the Bene Israel believed.) The Bene Israel knew only the Marathi language and virtually no Hebrew; their residual Jewish practices seem to have included the Sabbath and some dietary laws. The practice of the Sabbath and their predominant occupation caused their neighbors to call them "Saturday oil pressers." In the past 200 years, the Bene Israel have become reacquainted with Jewish traditions, acquired the Hebrew language, founded synagogues, and adopted Jewish holiday practices and prayers.

Though they do not follow all rabbinic traditions, their practices are now much closer to standard Jewish tradition than they were earlier.

The Jews of Cochin, unlike the Bene Israel, have always been rabbinic Jews. Nevertheless, they have adopted certain Indian practices, most striking of which is the Indian caste system, which divides the Jews into "White Jews" and "Black Jews." Jews are known to have lived in southern India for almost 1000 years, though there is little documentation of their early origins. Connections between their musical and liturgical traditions and those of Jews in Iraq (including Kurdistan) and Yemen have been identified. A look at Map 2.3 shows that these are likely places from which people could have sailed to India. There is also reason to believe that many of the White Jews are descended from Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing after the Expulsion and that the Black Jews are closer to the native Indian population. Some at least seem to be freed Indian slaves (known by the Hebrew term *meshuchrarim*).

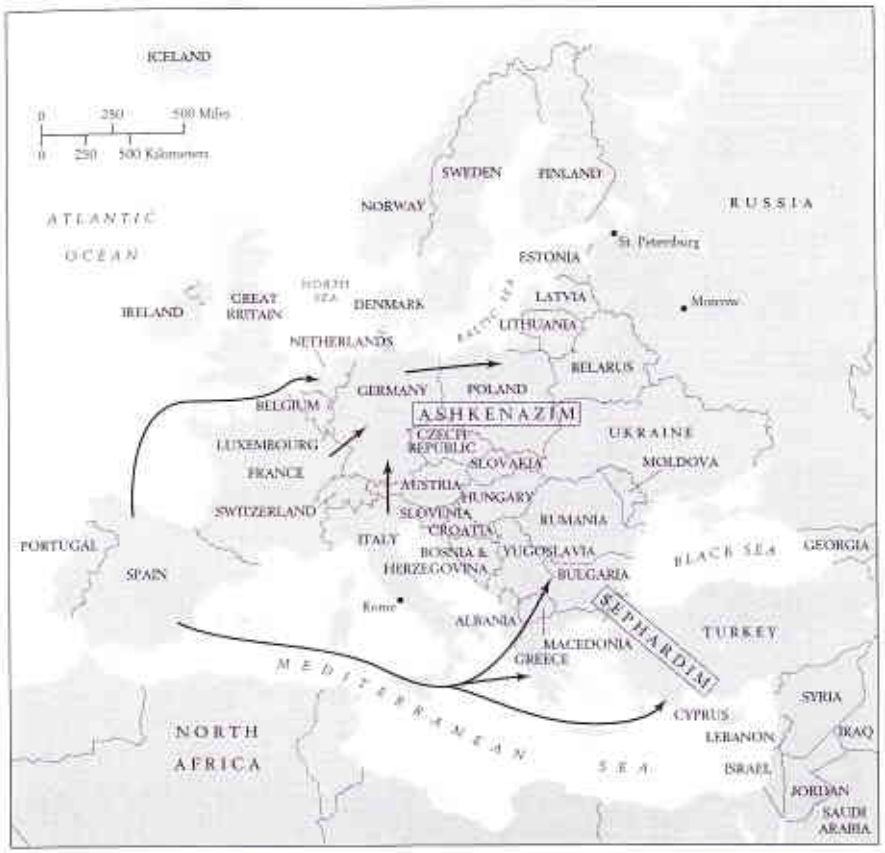
The third group of Jews came to India in the nineteenth century from Iraq. Generally known as the Baghdadi Jews, some of them became very wealthy. In general the three groups of Jews in India did not mix. The Iraqi Jews looked down on the "native" Jews, and neither the Cochin Jews nor the Iraqis considered the Bene Israel (the largest group) to be real Jews. Nevertheless the bulk of all three groups migrated to Israel after 1948.

Another far-off land where a considerable Jewish population lived was Ethiopia. The connection between the Jews and Ethiopia is an ancient one. Some Ethiopian languages belong to the Semitic language family, and the former royal family of the country considered themselves the descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The majority Christian religion of the country shows considerable influence from Judaism. So clearly there was early contact between Ethiopia and the Jewish religion. But the origin of the Jewish minority (known as Beta Israel) is less clear. They were certainly not Christians, though they did have such seemingly Christian practices as monasticism. There are three chief theories about the origin of the Ethiopian Jews. One theory is that the Jews traveled up the Nile River from Egypt; the second argues that the Jews came from southern Arabia (what is now Yemen) across the narrow Red Sea; and the third sees Beta

Israel as composed either of native Ethiopians converted to a form of Judaism or as a Judaizing sect of the Ethiopian church that broke away to become a separate Jewish group. The chief centers of the Ethiopian Jews were the mountainous northern provinces of Gondar and Tigre. At one time Beta Israel, whom the Christians called Falashas, meaning "foreigner" or "landless exile," were a serious military threat to the ruling dynasties, but in recent times they were a relatively small minority living under varying degrees of discrimination. Since 1905, when the European Jewish scholar Jacques Faitlovitch founded his "pro-Falasha Committee," Beta Israel has been (re)acquainted with the Hebrew language and some rabbinic traditions, though to a lesser extent than the Bene Israel of India. Today most of them reside in Israel, where many still preserve their ancient religious traditions.

At the same time that Jewish life was developing in Asia and Africa, the minority of Jews in Europe under Christian rule were also going through important changes (Map 2.6). Beginning in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, Jews again began to migrate into Northern Europe from the Mediterranean area. Jews from southern France moved into northern France, and Jews from France and Italy (and perhaps the Byzantine Empire) began to settle in southern and western Germany. From France some Jews migrated to England.

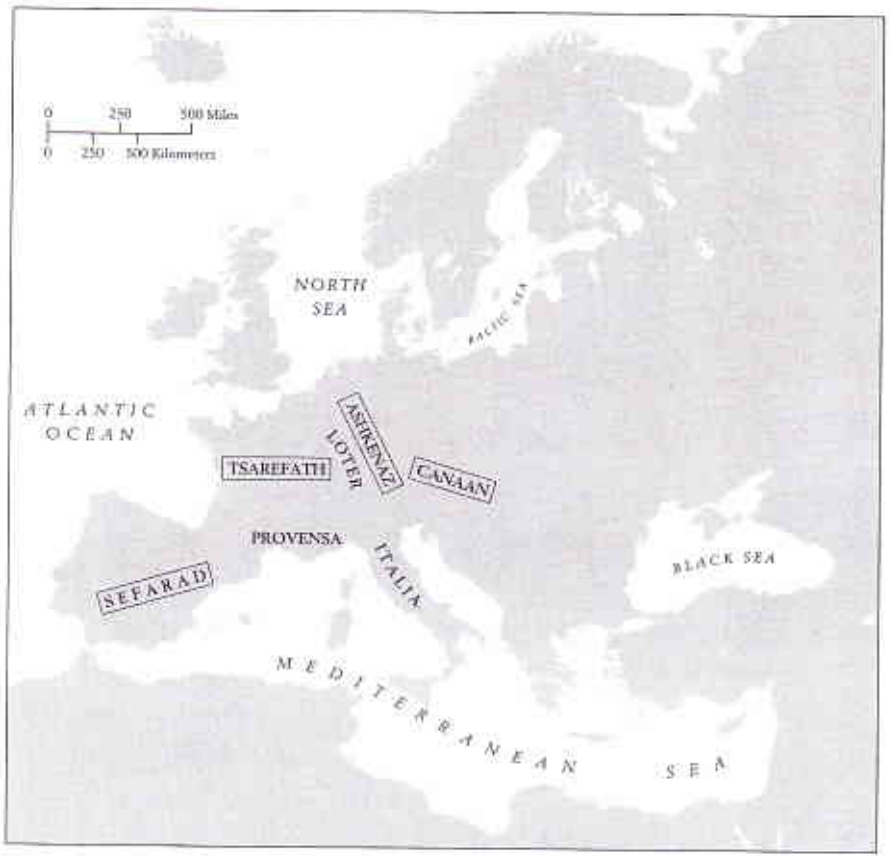
For reasons we can only guess at, the Jews of medieval Western Europe called their countries of residence by biblical names that originally applied to areas in the Middle East. Perhaps this was a way for them to feel at home in areas so far from their homeland. (After all, one of the greatest Spanish Jewish poets wrote a poem that begins "My heart is in the East but I am in the far, far West.") Whatever the reason, the Jews of northern France called their country Tsarefath, originally the name of a town in northern Israel. (Southern France was not called Tsarefath in Hebrew, but was referred to by the nonbiblical term Provensa, meaning "Provence.") The Jews of Spain applied the biblical name Sefarad (probably originally the city of Sardis in what is now Turkey) to their country. The Jews of Germany began to use the name Ashkenaz (one of the nations listed in Genesis, chapter 10, possibly applying to the Scythians, who lived near today's Crimea on the Black Sea). They referred to the Slavic countries (especially Bohemia) and



Map 2.6 Jewish migration patterns in Europe

their inhabitants as Canaan. This was based on an association of the biblical story that Canaan was to be "a servant of servants" and the relationship of the words "Slav" and "slave" (Map 2.7).

Since Jews under Christian rule and those under Muslim rule had few contacts with each other, their Jewish cultures also became differentiated. But, over time, the boundaries between Muslim and Christian lands changed. Muslim Spain was reconquered by the Christians in a slow process, from about the year 1000 to 1492. On the other side of Europe, the Byzantine Empire was conquered by the Muslim Turks, who also gained control over most of Southeastern Europe



Map 2.7 Medieval Jewish geographic names

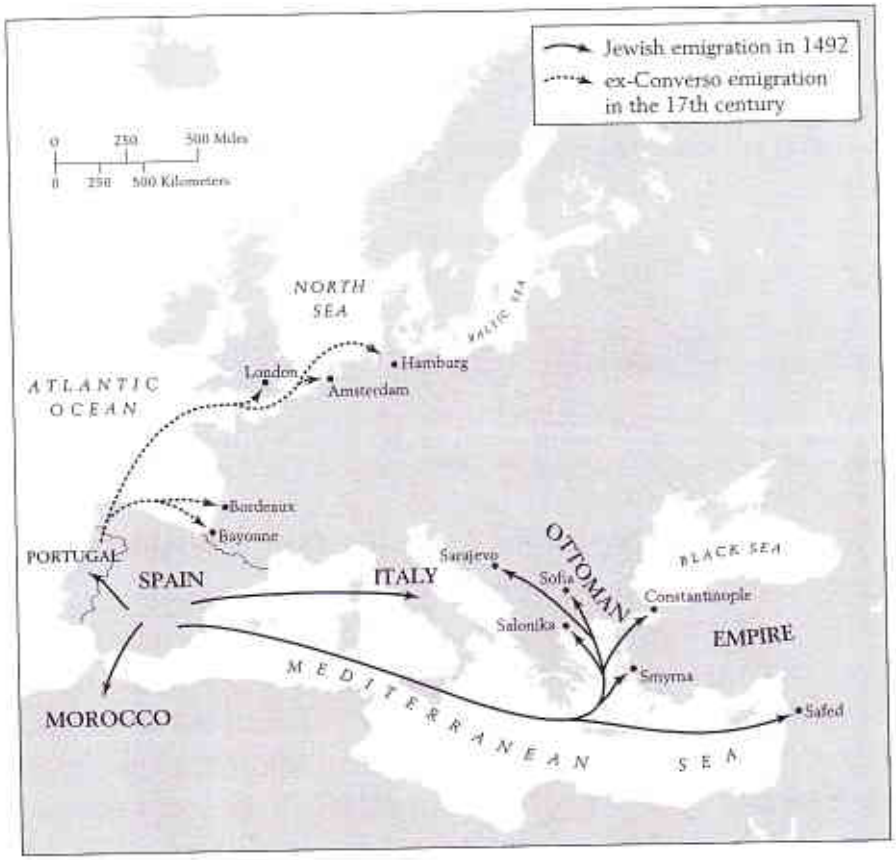
(today's Greece, Serbia, Bosnia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and part of Hungary) (Map 2.5).

During the Late Middle Ages the Jews became more and more estranged culturally from their non-Jewish neighbors. Until then, Jews coming to a new country usually learned the local language and culture, though often retaining a strong Jewish nuance. This pattern changed during the two most momentous Jewish migrations, those of German (Ashkenazic) Jewry and Spanish (Sephardic) Jewry to different parts of Eastern Europe.

The story of the Sephardic migration is complicated but less confusing than that of the Ashkenazic one. The migration was clearly rooted in persecution. Jew-

ish conditions began to decline in 1391, when anti-Jewish riots spread throughout the Iberian Peninsula, causing the forced conversion of a large percentage of Spanish Jewry. The final blow came in 1492, when the newly united Spanish kingdom of Ferdinand and Isabella gave the Jews a choice: convert or leave the country within three months. Large numbers of Jews left Spain, some for nearby Portugal or Morocco, others for Italy; the bulk of them eventually arrived in the Ottoman Turkish Empire, where they were welcomed. Great new Sephardic Jewish communities arose in cities like Salonika, Constantinople, Smyrna (Izmir), Sarajevo, Safed in the Holy Land, and other Ottoman cities (Map 2.8).

The Jews who left Spain in 1492 took with them their Spanish Jewish cul-



Map 2.8 Various waves of Sephardic emigration from Spain

ture and language. When they settled in established Jewish communities, they did not merge with the older Jewish population. Nor did they adopt the language of their new land. In North Africa, Jews of Spanish origin refused to intermarry with Arabic-speaking Jews for centuries. In the Turkish Empire, the newly arrived Sephardim soon outnumbered the Greek-speaking native Jewish population. In most places (except the area of Yanina mentioned earlier), they converted the native Jews into speakers of Judeo-Spanish (Djudezmo) and imposed their Sephardic customs on them.

A second type of Sephardic migration occurred after 1492 and was very different from the migration to Morocco or Turkey. This migration consisted of Jews who had either chosen to convert to Christianity rather than leave Spain or who had been caught in Portugal in 1497, when the Jews there were told to convert or leave without their children. Some of the converts (Conversos) sincerely became Christians, while others retained at least some of their Jewish practices and beliefs. Under the constant threat of exposure and punishment by the Inquisition, the Conversos had little alternative but to deny their Jewishness until the 1570s, when the former Spanish possessions in the Netherlands revolted, became independent, and provided a refuge for them. In the 100 years that followed, many Conversos (known officially as the "Portuguese nation") settled in Holland and in western seaports like Hamburg, London, and Bordeaux. With Christian family names like Nunez, Castro, and Rodriguez, these Spanish and Portuguese Jews had lived like Christians, married and baptized their children in church, spoke unaccented Portuguese or Spanish, and knew little about Judaism except the Bible. Often they had difficulty reintegrating themselves into Judaism, but some became pioneers of Jewish modernity in the West, since they were the first to combine outwardly non-Jewish culture and manners with an adherence to Judaism. These former Conversos differed from the "Eastern Sephardim" in the Ottoman Empire in their dress, names, and spoken language (Portuguese instead of Djudezmo) and in the degree of their adherence to rabbinic Judaism.

Like the Sephardic Jews who went to the Ottoman Empire, the Ashkenazic Jews who left Germany to go to Eastern Europe brought the culture of the Old Country with them. The migration from Germany to Poland, the main country

There is an alternative explanation of the origins of Eastern European Jewry that most scholars reject but that has had considerable popular vogue. The "Khazar theory" was publicized by Arthur Koestler in his book ***The Thirteenth Tribe*** and has been picked up not only by some Jews, but also by many anti-Semitic writers (who use it as evidence that the Jews are not the true descendants of biblical Israel). The Khazars were a nomadic tribe speaking a Turkic language who created a large kingdom centered at the mouth of the Volga River and extending over parts of what is now the Ukraine and southern Russia. In the eighth century the king of the Khazars and an unspecified proportion of his subjects converted to Judaism. No one knows exactly what happened to these Jewish Khazars after the downfall of the Khazar kingdom in the tenth century. The theory claims that they migrated westward and became the core of the later Eastern European Jewish community.

There are a number of reasons, historical, cultural, and especially linguistic, for rejecting the Khazar theory. Perhaps the strongest is that the language of the Ashkenazic Jews, Yiddish, is structurally Germanic and the majority of its vocabulary is of German origin, not Turkic. In fact, Yiddish contains virtually no words of Turkish or Tatar origin.

On the other hand, two Jewish populations in Eastern Europe, the Krimchaks and the Karaites, did speak languages in the Turkish linguistic family. Some Karaite communities could be found in the same towns as Ashkenazic Jewish communities, although they had few close ties to each other. It is more likely that descendants of the Khazars are to be found among the Krimchaks and East European Karaites than among Ashkenazic Jews.

of Jewish settlement in the East, was a less abrupt process than the migration of the Sephardim in 1492. The process began slowly, partly as a result of increasing persecution in Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It grew in intensity with the terrible massacres at the time of the Black Death of 1348–1350 and probably reached its peak between 1450 and 1550. About 90 percent of the Ashkenazic Jews ended up in the Polish Commonwealth, with the rest remaining in German-speaking Central Europe. Besides the push of the massacres and ex-

pulsions from parts of Germany (and from France and England), there was also the pull of economic opportunity in Poland. The Polish Commonwealth was a huge frontier land of opportunity for the Jews, with only a small native middle class to compete with them. Since the discriminatory laws of the West were rarely enforced in medieval Poland, the country was called by some "the Paradise of the Jews."

There is a remarkable parallel between the way the German Jews arriving in Poland acted and the way the Spanish Jews acted when they arrived in Turkey. The German Jews also found a native Jewish population, but like the Sephardim in Southeastern Europe, they did not adopt the language of their new country but rather imposed their own language on the older Jewish population. So, after 500 years in Poland, most Jews spoke Yiddish and knew little or no Polish, just as Sephardic Jews in the Turkish Empire spoke Djudezmo rather than Greek or Turkish.

Jews arriving in Poland found conditions very different from those in their land of origin. Medieval Poland was one of the largest countries in Europe (second only to Russia in size), covering not only today's Poland but also the former Soviet and now independent republics of Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and Belarus (Map 2.9). Poland was not only a huge country, it was also a weak one, controlled by a dispersed but powerful nobility rather than by the king. By the seventeenth century the king was largely a figurehead elected by an assembly of nobles; the candidate who made the most concessions to the nobility usually won. By the eighteenth century the central government had become so destabilized that a single noble member of the *sejm* (Parliament) could veto any law. The weakness of the Polish government was both good and bad for the Jews. On the one hand, the weak government gave the Jews leeway to govern themselves; on the other hand, it was often too weak to protect them.

The Polish Commonwealth came into existence through the 1386 marriage of Grand Duke Jagiello of Lithuania and Queen Jadwiga of Poland. This union loosely tied together two separate entities—the Kingdom of Poland, which was Catholic and mainly Polish speaking, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was originally pagan and later became mainly Eastern Orthodox and was popu-

Map 2.9 Jew

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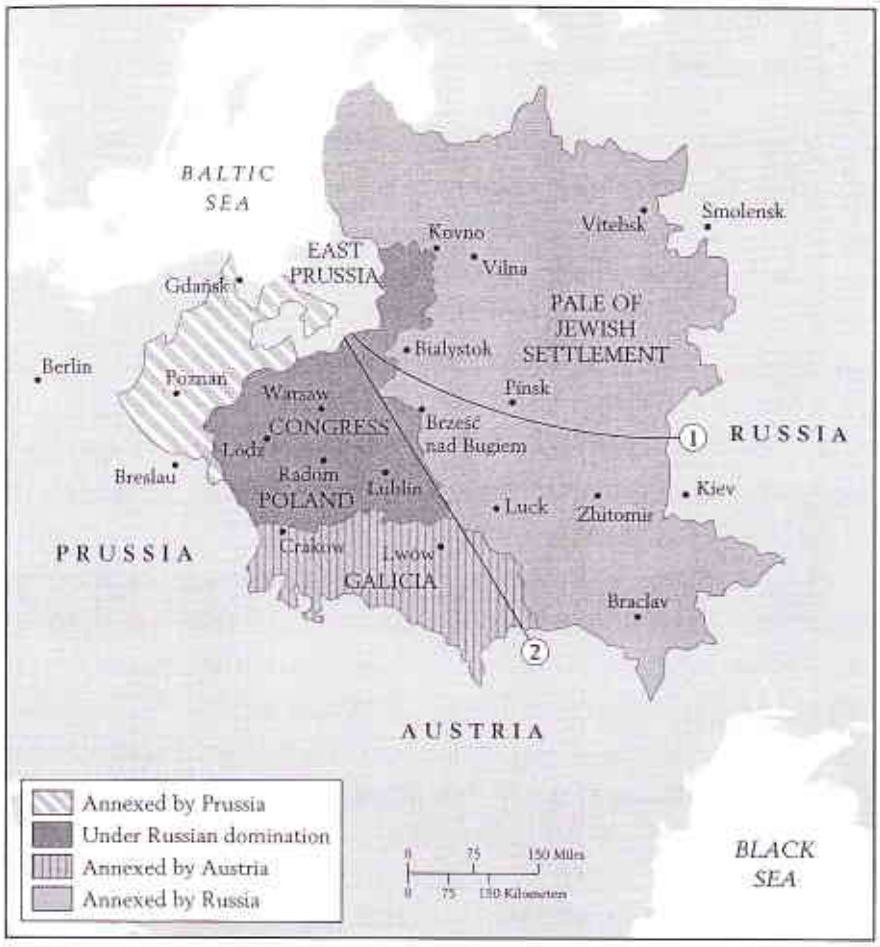

Map 2.9 Jewish cultural divisions of medieval Poland and the fate of Polish territories after partition

lated by many nationalities, especially Lithuanians, Byelorussians, and Ukrainians. In 1569 the two areas were more closely linked by the Union of Lublin, which also changed the internal boundaries of Poland. The southeastern area (Ukraine) was taken from Lithuania and placed under the direct rule of the Kingdom of Poland. Only the area north of line 1 remained part of Lithuania (Map 2.9).

The details of shifting Polish boundaries in the sixteenth century are crucial to the story of the Ashkenazim because these became the chief cultural boundaries of East European Jewry. The divisions between the major dialects of Yid-

dish follow both the pre-1569 (line 2) and the post-1569 boundaries (line 1) between Lithuania and Poland. No later boundary changes have had nearly the same influence. These boundaries also demarcate important cultural distinctions. For instance, the Hasidim were largely restricted to the south of line 1. Jews living west of line 2 people ate gefilte fish sweetened with sugar, to the horror of those east of the line, who spiced it with pepper and salt. Why these borders were so vital to Ashkenazic cultural life is hard to say.

Because Poland was so weak, had few natural boundaries, and was surrounded by strong countries, it could not keep its independence for long. Between 1772 and 1795, Poland was partitioned among Russia, Austria, and Prussia (later part of Germany). After a brief interlude when Napoleon conquered Eastern Europe, the division was made permanent in 1815, with the lion's share of Old Poland going to czarist Russia. The former Jews of Poland now found themselves under four different jurisdictions (Map 2.9). In the western province called Posen (and West Prussia) that went to Prussia, the forces of Germanization became strong. Jews there learned German, supported the dominant German minority against the Polish majority, and eventually became part of German Jewry. Most of them emigrated to German cities like Berlin and Breslau. The second area, Galicia, became part of the multiethnic Austrian Empire. Although at first the Galician Jews were treated harshly, they were eventually given full citizenship in 1867, when Austria was converted into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Because there was no single majority nationality in Austria, the Galician Jews retained their Yiddish-speaking culture and in the main remained Hasidic and poor. The third area was made into a Polish kingdom at the 1815 Congress of Vienna and was generally called Congress Poland. Since the king of this new state was also the czar of Russia, the semi-independence of this area soon disappeared and the area was treated virtually the same as the rest of the Russian Empire. The fourth and largest part of Poland was simply incorporated into Russia, with no pretense of Polish autonomy. Most of its inhabitants were not ethnically Polish, unlike those of Congress Poland.

Before the partitioning of Poland, Russia's policy regarding Jews was simple—they were forbidden to live in the country. Following the partitions, Em-

press Catherine the Great found herself ruling over the largest Jewish population in the world. After much hesitation the Russian government decided on a compromise: the Jews would not be expelled from the newly acquired areas, including parts of southern Russia recently conquered from the Turks, but they would not be allowed to settle in other parts of the empire. The provinces in western Russia where Jews were permitted to live have come to be known as the Pale of Settlement. One of the Pale's effects was to ensure that Jews did not live among many ethnic Russians, but rather among other minority nationalities, like Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Poles, and thus had relatively little incentive to assimilate to Russian culture.

These divisions remained in effect until World War I, when the map of Eastern Europe was completely revamped. In 1917 the Pale of Settlement in Russia was finally abolished by the Russian Revolution. The three great empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany were either dissolved or sharply reduced in territory. Instead a host of new, or in some cases revived, countries were created based on the principle of national self-determination. The boundaries of the new Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia were determined (at least in part) by the majority ethnic population distribution.

These new boundaries broke up the old cultural connections and created new ones. Often the cultural divisions among the Jews did not fit the new political situation at all. What had once been a fairly uniform Hungarian Jewish population (most of which had adopted the Hungarian language) now found itself split among a reduced Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. The Jews of western Romania (Transylvania and Maramures) and of southern Slovakia and Carpatho-Russia (in Czechoslovakia) still considered themselves Hungarian Jews (Map 2.10). The end of World War I created a greatly increased Romanian kingdom. Besides the areas of old Romania (Moldavia and Wallachia), there were the areas in the northwest taken from Hungary (see above), areas in the north taken from Austria (Bukovina), and areas in the northeast taken from Russia (Bessarabia) (Map 2.11). Romanian Jewry between the two world wars consisted of culturally disparate Jewish communities with different customs, Yid-

Map 2.10

Map 2.11

dish dialects, and religious and political attitudes. Unlike the other Jews in the Romanian state, the former Hungarian Jews spoke a different Yiddish dialect (more like the Yiddish of Galicia), often spoke Hungarian as well, and were heavily influenced by Hungarian culture.

"Jewish Geography"

Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors shared the same topography, climate, and rulers, but often Jewish geographic vision differed from that of the non-Jews. The Jews' connection to the Holy Land might be purely religious, but images of Jerusalem and the other holy cities often appeared in paintings on synagogue walls or in illustrated popular books and thus often played a great role in their imagination. As traders and craftsmen, Jews often traveled more than their agricultural neighbors and therefore had a wider geographical vista. They were more likely to have traveled to the local market town or even the nearest big city and more likely to correspond with relatives in faraway places. In some cases, Jewish networks of business connections, relatives, and correspondents were less tied to the political boundaries than were the networks of the non-Jews, though sometimes the reverse was true. Their historical memory went back to different ancestors and different places of origin than did the historical memory of their neighbors. After 1000 years, Ashkenazic Jews in northern and Eastern Europe still prayed for the welfare of a no longer existing exilarch and academy leaders in Babylonia. On the walls of the synagogue in Mohilev, deep in eastern Belarus, was an imaginative depiction of Worms, one of the first Ashkenazic settlements on the Rhine. In the imaginations of traditional Jews, centers of Jewish life in towns like ancient Alexandria, Sura, medieval Fez, Rotenburg, or Troyes and the small modern towns of Volozhin, Lubavitch, Radin, and Sadagura loomed large. For non-Jews the associations were different—Rome, Byzantium, Mecca, and Moscow.

Jews also drew the boundaries of regions differently from non-Jews. "Ashke-

naz" is a concept that has had at least three quite separate meanings in Jewish culture. In the Bible it referred to some area near the Black Sea. In the Middle Ages, Jews applied the term to Germany. Finally, after German Jews migrated to Eastern Europe, Ashkenaz and Ashkenazic Jewry were widened geographically to include all of Europe from Holland to Belarus, Romania to Latvia. The term "Sepharad" was similarly expanded. Originally it applied to a specific place in Asia Minor; then it was applied to mean Spain, and after the expulsion of Jews from Spain it was expanded include all of the lands where the exiles settled (the Ottoman Empire, Holland, and parts of North Africa). The term "Sephardic" has expanded even more than "Ashkenazic," since it is often loosely applied to all Jews who are not Ashkenazic. The Jewish conception of Lithuania was over six times as large as the modern Lithuanian Republic. In popular Israeli parlance today, "Kurdish" refers not to the Kurdish language and people, but to the Aramaic language and ethnicity of Jews from the Kurdish regions. The Jews of Central Asia are still known as "Bukharans" after the former Khanate of Bukhara, whether they live in what is now Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, or Turkmenistan.

Not only is the terminology applied to Jewish groups often different from that of the non-Jews, but so are the geographic patterns. In Germany the most profound linguistic and ethnographic differences are between the northern and southern parts of the country, whereas in the culture of the Jews of Germany, the main cultural divide was between the areas east and west of the Elbe River. Similarly, the major cultural differences within Eastern European Jewry follow administrative boundaries of the eighteenth century and earlier, with later boundaries having a much less profound effect. The cultural boundaries within Slavic culture often run in very different directions than those within Jewish culture.

Overall Patterns of Jewish Settlement

As we can see, the migration history of the Jewish people is long and complex and does not lend itself to simple generalization, but there seem to be a few overall

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patterns worth recognizing. First, traditional Jewish settlement was more or less confined to those parts of the world where Christianity and Islam became the dominant religions. Although Jews sometimes settled in areas whose inhabitants were pagans, this situation does not seem to have lasted long in the Middle Ages and thereafter. Either the pagans were Christianized, as in Lithuania, or Islamicized, or the Jewish community tended to assimilate and disappear, as in China. Even the seeming exception of India, where the main religion was not one of the "daughter religions" of Judaism, is not really an exception. The longest-lasting settlement of rabbinic Jews, in Cochin, was in the province of India (Kerala), where Christian influence was strongest.

In Asia, with few exceptions, there is a remarkable congruence between the eastern boundaries of the great empires of the Persians and Alexander the Great and the eastern boundaries of Jewish settlement before the nineteenth century. Only in Yemen and India did important Jewish communities arise in areas that had not been part of these two empires. Even far-off Bukhara had been part of the Persian and Hellenistic empires in ancient times. In Africa, too, premodern Jewish settlement was largely confined to areas that had been in territories of the Roman Empire. The one exception, Ethiopia, was an unusual community, and, even there, the Jews lived in a culture dominated by Christianity. Only in Europe were there important Jewish communities far to the north and east of the ancient empires. The Ashkenazic Jews, the Yemenites, and, to a lesser extent, the Sephardic Jews were the main Jewish groups outside the ancient empires. The push and pull of internal and external forces scattered traditional Jews over a large, but still delimited, area in Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Although the pattern changed over time, in most places the overall picture remained stable for centuries.

When we compare the ages and sizes of the various Jewish cultural groups, we are faced with an interesting and unexplained paradox. The largest Jewish group by far, the Ashkenazim, is also one of the most recent to come into existence. Ashkenazic settlement itself was most highly concentrated precisely in those areas of Eastern Europe where it was most recent. Although 500 years of mass settlement in Eastern Europe is certainly not a short time, it is not terribly old by the standards of ancient Jewish communities like those of Iraq and Iran.

When the Ashkenazic community began to emerge about 1000 years ago in the valley of the Rhine, it was a small group. Many historians number medieval Ashkenazic Jewry at only some 10,000 to 20,000 individuals. The vast majority of Jews in the Middle Ages lived in Muslim countries, and Judeo-Arabic was probably the spoken language of most Jews. In more recent centuries, however, Ashkenazic Jewry underwent explosive growth, while other Jewish communities remained stagnant. By 1650 the majority of world Jewry was Ashkenazic, and by 1900 the figure was well over 80 percent, mostly concentrated in what had been the medieval kingdom of Poland.

The huge population growth of Ashkenazic Jewry is especially puzzling because they lived in Christian Europe, the typical locale of persecution of the Jews. Despite the much higher rate of massacres among Ashkenazim than among Jews in the Muslim world, it was the Ashkenazim who kept growing. Not only do we not know the precise reasons for these demographic changes, very few scholars have even considered the phenomenon worthy of exploration. Did the Ashkenazim increase mainly from migration from other parts of the world, because of explosive birth rates, or, as is most likely, as a result of the increased prosperity and lowered death rates of the Western countries in modern times?

Our discussion of the migration history of the Jews has been restricted mainly to an enumeration of the various cultural areas, with some information on the chronology of the early settlement of each area. What we have not done, mainly because it is virtually impossible to reconstruct, is trace the precise routes by which Jews moved from one country to another. Even the few dates of origin that have been supplied may give an impression of precision, which is in fact misleading. In almost every area, the first settlements are undocumented. Often there are wildly differing oral traditions, legends, and documents about the first Jews in a particular region.

Also characteristic of Jewish settlement patterns is their discontinuity. This was especially evident in Europe, but it can be seen in parts of Asia and Africa as well. Jewish settlement was often interrupted by persecutions and expulsions, and many a Jewish community had to be refounded four or five times. Sometimes the later community had a different origin than the first. A simple exam-

ple is Vienna. Jews first settled there in the thirteenth century, were expelled in 1421, and returned in the sixteenth century, only to be expelled "definitively" in 1670. Even after this expulsion, small numbers of privileged Jews remained in the city. The Jewish population of Vienna stayed small until the middle of the nineteenth century, but between 1857 and 1910 it increased from 6200 to 175,000. Another example is Jewish settlement in Spain. Jews first arrived there in Roman times but were persecuted by the Christianized Visigoths in the sixth and seventh centuries. Jewish settlement resumed after the Muslim conquest in 711. Were the Jews of Muslim Spain the descendants of secret Jews who survived from Roman times, or were they new immigrants coming with the Arabs, and if so, from what Arab countries? Similar stories and questions can be repeated for hundreds of European communities.

Directions of migration sometimes reversed over time. In the early Middle Ages, Jews traveled from Southern Europe, especially Italy, to Northern Europe, especially France, England, and Germany. Expulsions of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries forced Jews to move east into Poland. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries migration reversed, and Jews from Galicia and the Russian Empire moved west to Germany, France, and England. In the latter two countries they made up the majority of the Jewish population. Similarly, Ashkenazic Jews settled in northern Italy in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, reversing the direction of migration that occurred years earlier. There were two-way migrations between Poland and Italy. As a result, some Eastern European Jews had names like Padwa and some Italian Jews were named Polacco. If we were to draw a precise map of all Jewish migrations, it would be so filled with overlapping arrows, reversed directions, and mixtures between immigrant waves coming from different directions that it would be impossible to read. The actual history of each Jewish community is more complicated than any summary view can delineate. No community of any size is uniform. Some Sephardic Jews migrated to Poland, and some Ashkenazic Jews came to Turkey even if they were a minority there. Descendants of various waves of migration lived in the same communities, intermarried with each other, and eventually merged into a single community. Similar patterns of migration and

mixtures of cultural groups continue up to our own day, but on a much larger scale than ever before.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing until the present, the traditional geographic pattern of the Diaspora outlined in this chapter changed totally. These changes were caused by economic opportunity, improved transportation, the horrors of the Holocaust, and the remarkable rebirth of the State of Israel. The areas that had the largest Jewish populations 150 years ago, now generally have very small or no Jewish communities. The largest Jewish communities today are located in areas where there was little or no Jewish population in 1850: the United States, Israel, the Russian Republic, France, England, and Argentina. Even in Russia, seemingly an exception, the areas of Jewish settlement today center in Moscow and St. Petersburg, both areas outside the Pale of Settlement, which lasted until 1917. While the traditional pattern of Jewish settlement coincided with traditional patterns of culture, expressed through language, food and costume, the overwhelming majority of Jews in the new population centers no longer follow most of these traditional patterns or retain only a few symbolic remnants of them. Although Jewish life continues, the old Diaspora communities have mostly come to an end.

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