

## *The Black Notebooks*

### *The Nazi Genealogy Bureaucracy*

Quite a number of years ago I found the *Judenkartei* in a church archive in West Berlin. This book was born on that day, when I stumbled upon several bookcases crammed with short, rectangular black notebooks. I soon learned that these notebooks were the fruit of an enormous Nazi genealogical research project. The notebooks appeared to include every single Jew who became a Protestant in Berlin, over the three centuries spanning 1645 to 1933. Converts out of Judaism had to be identified as such, because they and their descendants were false Aryans with no place in a racially purified Germany.

From my first day in the archive, I planned a book using the notebooks to write Jewish history. At first I did not know how the notebooks had been used in the Third Reich. Nor was it clear what the lessons of the notebooks would be. But I found myself immediately committed to the project. I knew that I must redeem the records from the evil system that had created them.

I found myself in the church archive in the first place because of a central question that arose in my dissertation research: Were the frequent conversions among wealthy Jewish salon women in Berlin during the last decades of the eighteenth century isolated cases, or rather part of a trend? To answer this question, I needed very detailed sources. Did more women than men leave

Judaism then? These were, after all, dramatic decades, when traditional Judaism was under attack and a reformed Judaism had not yet been created.<sup>1</sup>

And so I traveled to Berlin, in search of conversion records. Luck smiled upon me, and I obtained a multiple-entry visa to the German Democratic Republic. Daily, I crossed the Friedrichstrasse border between the two Berlins to explore the archives in what was then called East Berlin. At the municipal city archive there I was shown several large leather volumes of baptisms, filled with irregularly sized pages of old paper, poorly bound together. On these pages were listed local parish birth records, which had been sent yearly to the Prussian government by the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist clergy from across Prussia.<sup>2</sup>

After spending some hours studying the large leather volumes, I realized that they could help me discover the truth about conversion trends. But isolating the former Jews among the baptisms was not going to be easy. The problem was that two very different kinds of *Taufen*, or baptisms, were included in the local parish lists. Most of those who were baptized were infants, often only a few days old, who had been born to Christian parents. Few Jewish converts were that young. To create a list of formerly Jewish converts, one would have to use their names and ages to separate them out from the far more numerous baptisms of infants born into Christian families.

As I was contemplating whether I should take on this mammoth task, I kept up my search for more original conversion records. Perhaps I could discover a source in which the Jewish conversions were already separated out from the infant baptisms. And so I wrote to a number of historians and archivists in Berlin, asking for leads. It felt like only a few days after the letters left my desk when the phone rang in my *Wohngemeinschaft*, my communal apartment, on the Geneisenaustrasse in West Berlin. On the line was Frau Cécile Lowenthal-Hensel from the Mendelssohn Archive, and herself a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn, German Jewry's most important eighteenth-century intellectual. Frau Lowenthal-Hensel suggested that I visit the Evangelical Central Archive on the Jebenstrasse, across the street from the Zoological Garden train station, near the center of West Berlin.

The next morning I was there. In that quiet archive inside an austere, gray-carpeted building, I first saw the *Judenkartei*, about sixty narrow rectangular black volumes. Looking about me, I saw that the shelves with the black notebooks took up only a small section of the quite enormous archive. Otherwise, the walls of the entire large room were filled floor-to-ceiling with narrow wooden file drawers containing small index cards. What was all of this, I wondered?

The archive's director, a kindly gentleman named Dr. Fischer, sat with me

and explained the story behind the notebooks and the file drawers. He recounted how Protestant pastors had been funded by the Nazi government to create precisely the detailed record of conversions for which I had been searching—a story that, after much further study, I came to understand in detail. Like so many sad tales from the twentieth century, this one had begun in 1933. Three months after taking power, in April, the Nazi government announced new laws which required that all citizens document their racial descent. The idea was that underneath religion one could find something more basic, which the Nazis called race. The plan was to replace the religious polarity of Christians and Jews with the racial polarity of Aryans and Jews.<sup>3</sup>

But it soon became obvious that replacing Christians with Aryans was not at all simple. The connections between religion and ethnicity were terribly tangled, complicated, and messy. Judaism, to be sure, is both a religion and an ethnicity. But Christianity is a trans-ethnic religion, at least in principle. For centuries Christianity has attracted believers born into very diverse ethnic groups. Entry into Judaism is by birth to a Jewish mother, whereas entry into Christianity is always by baptism or confirmation.<sup>4</sup> What was problematic for the Nazi plan was that thousands and thousands of Jews had been baptized over the centuries in Germany. The point is that if Christians were to be recast into Aryans, the Jewish converts and their descendants could no longer be considered legitimate Christians.

Thus overnight there was a huge demand for genealogical knowledge. Most individuals needed to document their family tree back to their four grandparents, because that was the initial limit placed on genealogical research. But those who aspired to enter the Nazi system at a high level had to document even more generations back into their pasts. And where could one find all the original records? Few Germans knew at which church they should search for all these documents. For already back in the eighteenth century, Berlin had more than fifty Protestant churches. Here was the impetus to create the file drawers, whose cards allowed descendants to find the right parish for each ancestor. Each card in the wooden drawers in the Jebenstrasse archive listed the name, birth date, and local parish of every infant born into a Protestant family and baptized in Berlin, going back to 1645.<sup>5</sup> Using the cards in the drawers, any descendant could know at which local parish they could find their original baptismal documentation.

This vast carding project was organized by Pastor Karl Themel of the Luisenstadt Church in Berlin. Using funds provided by the Ministry of the Interior, Themel assembled a crew of paid workers and volunteers, called the *Verkartungstruppen* or the “carding troops.” Their task was to copy out the details from the original records. If the ancestor was an infant born into a

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Protestant family, the individual's data was noted on the cards, which went into the wooden drawers. But if the ancestor had been born into another faith and then had entered the church by baptism, the information was copied onto a notebook page, and it was these pages which filled the *Judenkartei*. Pastor Themel's carding troops filled in 50,000 cards and notebook pages per week. By 1937, they had logged over a million baptisms and conversions.<sup>6</sup>

In Nazi Germany, having information about someone's genealogy became a crucial kind of power. Secret ancestries discovered in dusty files were used to make accusations, perhaps demand blackmail, in private and in public. Indeed the information Pastor Themel's carding troops were collecting became ever more sensitive over time, as the meaning of the new categories sharpened, and the fateful consequences of belonging to the Jewish category grew more and more clear. It became apparent to the government that such an important classification project could not be left to church officials, no matter how vigilant they might be. This was a job for the Nazi state to supervise.

And so what began as a project of the Nazi party was soon enough taken over by the state. The special office which coordinated Pastor Themel's carding project and the other genealogy efforts was originally called the *Reichsrippenamt*, or the Kinship Research Office, which I abbreviate here as the RSA. Before the seizure of power in January 1933, the Kinship Research Office had been a section of the Nazi party, used to inspect the racial heritage of new party members. But once the party had attained state power, the RSA became a government genealogy office, housed in the Ministry of the Interior.<sup>7</sup>

Now because the Nazis were so obsessed with race, the RSA was not the only office in Nazi Germany collecting the details about people's backgrounds. As was entirely typical then and there, state offices and party offices often were charged with overlapping missions. Even after the RSA became a state office in 1933, the Nazi party still maintained its own genealogy division, and so did the SS. During the 1920s, the SS had been a small organization of bodyguards for Hitler. Eventually it would become a huge and diverse "state within a state" inside the Nazi system. The point for our story is that the SS needed the information in the black notebooks, because their applicants had to be especially pure racially. Then, too, researchers writing about Jews and race also needed the data collected by the RSA. For instance, the staff of the Research Division on the Jewish Question of the National Institute for the History of the New Germany set to work calculating historical statistics on conversion and intermarriage.<sup>8</sup>

The RSA staff coordinated the sudden need for genealogy research in a variety of ways. They organized the transfer of original local parish registers from towns across Germany to the RSA offices in Berlin for microfilming.

They justified this mammoth project by claiming that the original registers were deteriorating quickly, due to the explosion in genealogical research after the Aryan laws of 1933. The RSA staff also instructed local pastors how to fill in the myriad versions of the family trees required of descendants. The RSA printed up long and short versions of the so-called Aryan Pass, which summarized an individual's genealogical descent. RSA staff also coordinated the work of freelance genealogy researchers who were hired by individuals to track down all of the affidavits from the archives. And when the paper trail was ambiguous, the RSA staff turned to scholars from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology in Berlin. The anthropologists working with the Institute were charged by the RSA with the task of investigating the racial status of individuals whose racial descent was disputed.<sup>9</sup> Noses, head shapes, hair color, and body size were measured in an attempt to sort individuals into the Aryan or the Jewish category. The idea, if not the reality, was that the borders around each group were sharp and clear.

By 1935, most of the German population had already completed their family trees. But the RSA staff was still busy locating the odd missing bits of information needed for a precise racial label. Once they had finished filling in the narrow pages in the *Judenkartei* notebooks, they planned to create additional card indexes using marriage and even death records. The RSA director estimated that with approximately 350,000 parish register volumes from 50,000 local communities across Germany, there would be as many as 800 million birth, marriage, and death entries to be carded, at a potential cost of 80 million marks.<sup>10</sup>

The collapse of religious differences into sharply enclosed racial divisions looks to us now to be a step that made genocide possible. But we must force ourselves to see genealogical research in its proper frame, as it must have appeared in the 1930s. This point is made shockingly clear when we learn the Nazis were not the only Germans who had a passion in these years for race and genealogy. An enthusiasm for roots investigations was not necessarily a step toward genocide before the Nazis seemed to make it so. If Jews could be obsessed about race and genealogy, then surely it was a trend of the times. For example, in 1934, Arthur Czellitzer, a Jewish physician, published a little book called *Mein Stammbaum*, "My Family Tree." In the introduction Czellitzer reminded his readers that the "new government strives to make us all conscious of the importance of the family's worth to the state, and the significance of race and an interest in one's ancestors." No wonder, he noted, that Jews too were interested in these themes.<sup>11</sup> Czellitzer's words show us that even after the Nazis had taken power, Jews could value genealogical research. This truth forces us to understand why the work of the RSA did not seem so

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disturbing and shocking to contemporaries, Jewish and Christian alike. Our own hindsight interferes with our ability to see the past clearly.

The RSA staff took a keen interest in the several hundred thousand individuals whose family trees were not completely Aryan. For this task Jewish birth and marriage records were indispensable. To coordinate the Jewish side of the project, the RSA staff turned to the Gesamtarchiv der deutsche Juden, or the Central Archive of the German Jews, which I abbreviate here as the GSA. The archive had been founded in 1906. Its offices were on the top floor of the community building that adjoined the Oranienburger Street synagogue, a famous synagogue in the heart of Berlin's old Jewish neighborhood. Before 1933, the GSA had been a rather obscure and modest institution. The elevator did not go up to its top floor offices, and its board of directors had not met once since 1923.<sup>12</sup> But beginning in 1933, it suddenly became a bustling center of research activity. Since 1920, the director of the archive had been Jacob Jacobson, a productive genealogy scholar with remarkably conservative and nationalist political views.<sup>13</sup> Jacobson faced difficult practical and political problems when the GSA was swept up in the genealogy mobilization in the spring of 1933.

The plot very much thickens when we learn that Jacobson had his own genealogical ambitions, including a plan to make the GSA into a truly national collection of community records. Here, oddly enough, the RSA concurred, for it too needed to centralize Jewish community records. The RSA sent Jacobson all across Germany, collecting birth, marriage, and death registers from local synagogues. Eventually, the GSA would house the records of some 400 Jewish communities. Jacobson also found card indexes a useful research tool. In 1935, he reported that his staff had begun work on an index of all Jewish births in Berlin during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup>

Jacobson lived in dark times, and he often found himself in painful circumstances. Reading his memoir can be unsettling indeed. At one juncture in the early 1940s several of Jacobson's relatives were being deported "to the east" from Hamburg, and RSA officials sent him on a research trip to Hamburg so that he could bid goodbye to his family. But at least in his memoirs, Jacobson never articulated a critique of the RSA's ambitions or functions. He later remembered that "the curious relationship between the RSA and me was conducted in an absolutely correct fashion. However things were going, the gentlemen from the RSA were helpful to me and they had the same attitude to all the employees of the Archive."<sup>15</sup>

One of the few ways that Jacobson could help partial Jews move out of the Jewish category was to find an Aryan paternal ancestor who might have had a real or fictitious adulterous affair with a Jewish woman. The "discovery" of an

Aryan father or grandfather would render the descendant less Jewish from the Nazis' point of view. Unlike traditional Jews, who measured descent through the mother, Nazi rules allowed paternal descent. In some lights Jacobson appears to have been a naïve collaborator. But other episodes illustrate that he definitely had his principles. He was furious with those who wanted to find records which would make them less Jewish so as to secure a better position in the Nazi system. One day a Jewish-looking army officer came to the GSA, sent by his superiors to inquire into whether or not he had been born into a Jewish family. Jacobson was not particularly eager to help the officer. But he found no Jewish ancestors, and he sent the man away happy. By chance, the very next day, Jacobson found that both the man's parents were buried in one of the local Jewish cemeteries. But his knowledge came too late to hurt the officer's career as a hidden partial Jew in the army.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond his own convictions, perhaps a more salient reason for Jacobson to be cautious was that he actually had very little freedom to alter the details in the GSA records. For the RSA had created two complete sets of the Judenkartei notebooks, one for the church archive and one for its own use. The "carding troops" had filled in two identical notebook pages for each convert included in the original parish registers. One page went into the black notebooks now housed at the Jebenstrasse archive. An identical page went into a duplicate set of notebooks in the RSA's own archive. Desperate partial Jews who came to Jacobson and begged him to destroy their ancestor's page in the notebooks could well be provocateurs, sent by the RSA staff to check up on his work.

Jacobson's life would become ever more difficult. He and his wife and son were planning to leave Germany in the fall of 1938, just after Crystal Night in November. All three had the necessary passports and visas. But hours before their departure, their passports were confiscated. After Jacobson petitioned the Gestapo, his wife's and son's papers were returned to them. Their son left immediately for England, and Frau Jacobson also left Germany just before the war began in September 1939. Jacobson himself, however, was forced to remain in Berlin to work for the RSA.

At the same time that the Jacobson family was facing such difficult decisions, institutions with far more power than the RSA decided to move the RSA offices into the Oranienburger Street Jewish community building.<sup>17</sup> During the terrible night of November 9, later called Crystal Night because of the broken glass from Jewish stores and synagogues which covered the streets, the Gestapo seized the community records housed in many synagogues. They wanted to consolidate all of the Jewish registers, so they moved the RSA into the community building where the GSA had its offices. At one level this was a

practical decision, but the symbolism was and remains chilling. I will always remember the shock and anger I felt, sitting in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, when I came upon a piece of stationery with the letterhead Reichsippenamt, Oranienburgerstr. 28. It made me furious and sad to see that genealogy policing office publicly, graphically, identified with that Jewish space. The Nazi genealogy machine was no longer just exploiting Jacobson's labors; now they had taken over his archive. His always awkward position had become much, much worse.

The decision to keep Jacobson in Germany after 1938 shows that long after the entire German population had been placed into racial categories, the RSA was still filling drawers and notebooks with data about Jews and former Jews and partial Jews. After 1938 its domain was merely a paper empire. We know from the complaints of its director that the RSA was in fact given no role in setting Jewish policy. But the staff continued to collect genealogical records in their new quarters on Oranienburger Street.

In 1943, once Germany was declared empty of Jews, Jacobson himself was deported to the ghetto of Theresienstadt. And here too he pursued his genealogical researches, for he was allowed to take his research documents with him. He survived and later joined his family in England. Many years after the war ended, Jacobson would publish two large volumes of Berlin Jewish history, rich fruits of his long years of archival work. Indeed as I have written this book I have often turned the pages of Jacobson's wonderfully detailed volumes, searching out birth dates and correct spelling and family relationships. But it is impossible to use his books without pondering the complexities of the RSA exploitation of his focused dedication to Jewish genealogy.<sup>18</sup> It is no easy task to determine whether he was a pathetic victim, a self-interested collaborator, or a secret hero of Jewish scholarship.

Because they were organizing Christian as well as Jewish genealogical research, in principle the RSA staff should have been well informed about the *Mischlinge*, or partial Jews.<sup>19</sup> After all, there was considerable pressure to learn the details, since decisions about the status of the partial Jews were a subject of protracted debate among Nazi officials. Yet the supposedly hyper-efficient Nazi state had begun to murder Jews before it had finished identifying who belonged to the unlucky race. As late as the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, there was still debate about the status of the partial Jews.<sup>20</sup> In other words the question of *who was a Jew* was still continuing even after real genocide had already begun. As the policymakers sat in the villa on the shores of the Wannsee lake in Berlin, gas vans had already been used to murder over forty thousand Jews and gypsies in the extermination camp in Poland called Chelmno.<sup>21</sup>