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The Frankfurt Judengasse in Eyewitness Accounts from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

In *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* [The Rabbi of Bacherach, 1824/40] Heinrich Heine synthesises the pre-history of the Judengasse in Frankfurt from the point of view of a fictitious narrator of the fifteenth century:

Vor jener Zeit wohnten die Juden zwischen dem Dom und dem Mainufer, nämlich von der Brücke bis zum Lumpenbrunnen und von der Mehlnwaage bis zu Sankt Bartholomäi. Aber die katholischen Priester erlangten eine päpstliche Bulle, die den Juden verwehrte in solcher Nähe der Hauptkirche zu wohnen, und der Magistrat gab ihnen einen Platz auf dem Wollgraben, wo sie das heutige Judenquartier erbauten.¹

The time referred to was 1462, when both Kaiser Friedrich III and Pope Pius II demanded of the Frankfurt city council that the twenty Jewish families of the town be removed from their 300-year-old settlement between the cathedral and the river Main to a desolate strip 330 metres long and covering an area of about 15,000 square metres in the “Wollgraben,” a former moat bordering on the Fischerfeld on the Eastern edge of the city, far away from the Main and from trade routes and without a well.² The Jews were given the choice of moving to the area selected for them, which was in time to become known as “New Egypt,” or to leave the city entirely. Timber-frame houses with the gable facing to the street were built on either side of the curving Judengasse, the Wollgraben Gate closing it off from the Fischerfeld at one end, the Bornheimer Gate from the Fahrgasse at the other and, after

¹ Heinrich Heine, *Der Rabbi von Bacherach*, in Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Klaus Briegleb (Munich: Hanser, 1976), I: 479. [Previously the Jews lived between the cathedral and the bank of the Main, namely, from the bridge to the Lumpenbrunnen and from the flour weighing scales to Saint Bartholomew. But the Catholic priests procured a Papal Bull which denied the Jews the right to live in such proximity to the main church, and the magistrate gave them a place on the Wollgraben, where they built the present-day Jewish quarter.]

² Cf. Rosemarie Schuder and Rudolf Hirsch, *Der gelbe Fleck: Wurzeln und Wirkungen des Judenhasses in der deutschen Geschichte* (Cologne: Röderberg im Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1988), 634.

the fire of 1711, the Judenbrücken Gate from the Predigergasse in the middle. By 1500 there were about 100 people living in relatively spacious circumstances spread over fourteen houses. Due to an economic boom in the course of the sixteenth century, the Jewish population began to grow steadily, but without the ghetto being allowed to extend — by 1550 there were fifty-three houses in exactly the same area, 107 houses by the year 1575, 185 by 1605 and, five years later, 3000 persons in 197 houses,³ in what had become one of Europe's most densely populated residential areas.

To accommodate this thirtyfold population explosion, more houses had to be wedged in behind the two rows of existing houses, occupying every backyard and green patch available, so that the only open-air spaces left were some dark and dank inner courtyards and the street itself, which ranged in width from a mere two to six metres. The streetfront houses were also extended by up to five upper storeys cantilevered outwards to create more living space, not only blocking out the sunlight and reducing ventilation but also creating an extreme fire hazard, resulting in the conflagrations of 1711, 1721 and 1774. There was a strict curfew imposed upon the inhabitants, the gates being locked at dusk by the Christian beadles employed by the city council but paid for compulsorily by the Jewish community. The inhabitants were closed into the ghetto on Christian Holy Days or during Holy Week, or "wann Fürsten und Herren einreiten"⁴ [when princes and lords ride into town]. The sanitary conditions were among the worst in Europe, leading to a disproportionately high child mortality rate. Only some houses had privies from which the excrement was conducted through chutes to the moat behind the medieval city wall, where it stagnated due to the sluggish water movement. In the many households without lavatories, the occupants often resorted to emptying their excreta and slops into the street below at the dead of night. No wonder that, as Ismar Elbogen observed, the ghetto was a hotbed of infectious diseases and of squabbling among the sorely pressed inhabitants.⁵ Isidor Kracauer quotes an anonymous travel writer as saying that the deadly pale faces of the inhabitants lamentably distinguished them from all other citizens.⁶ In the course of time, attempts were made by the city council, as in its "Judenstätigkeit" [Statutes regarding Jews] of 1617, to curtail the population growth in

³ Cf. Isidor Kracauer, *Geschichte der Juden in Frankfurt am Main (1150-1824)* (Frankfurt am Main: Vorstand der Israelitischen Gemeinde, 1925), I: 311-12.

⁴ From the municipal Jewish Statutes of 1705, cit. Johann Jacob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1714-17), III: 165-66.

⁵ Cf. Ismar Elbogen and Eleonore Sterling, *Die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum 1988), 112. This famous study by Ismar Elbogen, first published in Berlin in 1935, was revised and updated by Eleonore Sterling in the edition quoted here.

⁶ See Kracauer, *Geschichte der Juden in Frankfurt am Main*, II: 233.

the ghetto by stipulating a maximum of 500 households, accepting only six new inhabitants and allowing a maximum of twelve marriages each year and of only one female and one male servant per household.⁷

In spite of such horrendous living conditions, the Judengasse maintained its attractiveness to Jews from elsewhere. One reason for this was that the Jewish community benefited greatly from the general economic boom which Frankfurt — in contrast to most other Imperial cities — enjoyed in the course of the sixteenth century due to its easy access along the Main and Rhein to the thriving economy of Holland as well as to the influx of diligent Dutch Calvinist merchants and craftsmen fleeing from the Inquisition and bringing with them an advanced manufacturing technology.

Despite the severe professional restrictions still imposed on Jews since the Middle Ages, they did make a considerable niche for themselves in the commercial areas of the buying and reselling of merchandise, particularly of garments and precious metals and stones, pawnbroking and the changing of money, a lucrative activity in the Trade Fair city. This led in time to the juxtaposition of conspicuous wealth and extreme deprivation within the confines of the Judengasse. But the wealth generated by Frankfurt's commerce also facilitated the development of the Judengasse as a centre of vibrant Jewish culture and Hebraic learning and piety, indeed one of Europe's most respected seats of Talmudic and Biblical exegesis,⁸ which the famous Rabbi Schabtai Horowitz (ca. 1595-1660) could praise as "die heilige Gemeinde Frankfurt, eine große Stadt Gottes in ganz Deutschland, eine Anhöhe, zu der alle sich wenden"⁹ [the pious community of Frankfurt, a great city of God known in all of Germany, an eminence towards which all turn]. The cultural, social and educational activity of the Judengasse found its architectural expression in the establishment of several public institutions, such as its renowned synagogue, a house of learning, a festival and dance hall, a hospital (which also served as a poorhouse and jail), a hostel for students without means, a ritual bathhouse and a communal bakery.

The socio-cultural life in the Judengasse tends to be either ignored or scorned by non-Jewish observers. Ridiculing the sacred buildings, they demonstrate their ignorance of all aspects of Jewish life and confirm widespread prejudices. For instance, Johann Christian Edelmann's *Selbstbiographie* [Autobiography] of 1736 claims that the in-

⁷ See Michael Wolffsohn and Uwe Puschner, *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland: Quellen und Kontroversen* (Munich: Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1992), 50.

⁸ Cf. Eugen Mayer, *Die Frankfurter Juden: Blicke in die Vergangenheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Waldemar Kramer, 1966), 31-44.

⁹ Cit. in *Frankfurt am Main: Jüdisches Städtebild*, ed. Siegbert Wolf (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 1996), 8.

terior of the synagogue resembles the inner disposition of the Jews themselves, which he describes as dismal, unclean and disorderly. Edelman's comments are typically ethnocentric in that he can only register Jewish rituals as being comically outlandish. He found it difficult to suppress laughter on witnessing the "Geheule" [wailing] and "Gewackele" [wobbling to and fro] of the faithful and the "Kater-Geschrei" [caterwauling] of the precentor.¹⁰

Apart from the synagogue, one other institution in particular attracted the observers' interest: the *mikveh* or women's bath-house. The Styrian Martin Zeiller, writing in 1632, reports, for instance, that the women had to ritually cleanse themselves before marrying or directly after giving birth before they could lie with their husbands.¹¹ In *Des Herrn von Blainville [...] Reisebeschreibung durch Holland, Oberdeutschland und die Schweiz, besonders aber durch Italien* [Monsieur Blainville's Travelogue through Holland, Upper Germany and Switzerland, particularly through Italy, 1764] the French traveller Picard Blainville, who visited the Judengasse in 1705, describes the baths in which the women were constrained to submerge themselves as being thirty feet beneath the ground and so cold that one would not survive long in the water.¹² Of the synagogue he said that it was more like a kitchen than a temple, with its walls blackened by smoke and its pervasive smell.¹³ Such observations seem at first to fall into line with the pejorative stereotyping characteristic of subsequent German commentators, but Blainville is also critical of the role of both the pre- and post-Reformation Christian community in bringing about the miserable living and working conditions of the Frankfurt Jews. He points out the fundamental contradiction in the Christian rationalisation of the persecution of the Jews on the grounds of deicide as constituting a blatant violation of their own articles of faith based on love and charity.¹⁴

The travel writer Peter Wienand, a doctor and philosopher from Spandau, remarked in his travelogue *Herrn Georgen von Fürst, eines berühmten Cavaliers aus Schlesien: Curieuse Reisen durch Europa* [A Famous Cavalier's, Sir George of Fürst's, Interesting Journey through Europe, 1739], with surprise during his visit in 1690 that amidst great poverty some of the "Frauenzimmer" [womanfolk] in the women's gallery in the synagogue wore "kostbare Kleider und Kleinodien an ih-

¹⁰ Cit. in Wolffsohn and Puschner, *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, 52-53.

¹¹ Cit. in Bettina Mähler and Hans Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse im Spiegel zeitgenössischer Berichte," in *Der Frankfurter Börseplatz: Zur Archäologie eines politischen Konfliktes*, ed. Michael Best (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988), 166. I have drawn heavily on Mähler's and Sarkowicz's very helpful anthology of eyewitness reports on the Frankfurt Judengasse.

¹² Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 174.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

rem Halse¹⁵ [precious garments and jewellery around their necks]. The grammar-school teacher Johann Jacob Schudt, from whose *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* [Jewish Curiosities, 1714-17] Heine was to draw much of his background information for *Der Rabbi von Bacherach*, also remarked in 1714 on the costly golden spangles, lace and silk worn by the womenfolk, adding the remark: "doch hat alles keine rechte Façon, stehet nicht so propre wie der Christen Kleidung/und der Jud guckt aller Orten hervor/obgleich die Finger voll Ring stecken"¹⁶ [And yet it all has no real style and is not as becoming as the way Christians dress, and everywhere the Jew peeps out, no matter how full of rings the fingers are]. Such observations prefigure the kind of argument frequently made by enemies of Jewish emancipation since the late eighteenth century. They foreshadow racist stances by implying that Jewish attempts to simulate the rest of society were in vain due to the intrinsically alien nature of the Jews.

Several reports contrived to use even the fires that frequently devastated the Judengasse to extract an anti-Judaic message. The wigmaker Johann Hermann Dielhelm, who visited the Judengasse in 1740, expressed the view that the conflagration of 1711 had been an act of very meticulous divine intervention:

Bedenklich war dabey, daß, als die eine Seite oder Helfte der Gasse abgebrant war, der Wind sich nachgehends drehete, gleichsam als habe er da das seinige verrichtet, und wolle nunmehr dasjenige, worzu er gesandt sey, ferner bewerkstelligen; massen dann auch dadurch der andere und grössere Theil der Gasse gleichfals vom Feuer ergriffen, und eingeäschert wurde. [...] Sonst ist dieses auch noch von diesem Juden-Brand merkwürdig, daß, von den vielen nahe dabey befindlichen Christen-Häusern, nicht ein einziges versehret worden.¹⁷

For Johann Michael von Loen, a descendant of Dutch Calvinist immigrants and, as it happens, the husband of the sister of Goethe's grandmother Katharina Sibylla Lindheimer, the catastrophic fires of 1711 and 1721 in the Judengasse had been a salutary act of an intelligent fate to restore hygiene to the polluted space. His prejudices contain *in ovo* all the basic elements of the virulent anti-Semitism that one associates

¹⁵ Ibid., 168.

¹⁶ Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*, II/1: 252.

¹⁷ Johann Hermann Dielhelm, *Denkwürdigkeiten und nützlicher Antiquarius des Neckar-, Mayn-, Lahn- und Moselstroms* (Frankfurt am Main 1740), Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 175. [What gave one food for thought was the fact that one side or half of the street had burnt down when the wind subsequently turned, as if it had done its work there and now wanted to finish off what it had been sent to accomplish, as a result of which the other and larger part of the street also caught fire and was reduced to ashes. Another curious thing about this Jewish fire is that, of the many houses inhabited by Christians in the immediate vicinity, not a single one was damaged.]

with nineteenth-century Germany, based, as it was, on a chronic disinclination to link cause and effect, and reducing the hated minority to the status of vermin, which, by the perverse logic of racism, would be exterminable, were it not for the Jews' uncanny reproductiveness:

Die Juden [...] leben in diesen sumpfigsten Winkeln wie das Ungeziefer im Unflat. Das Feuer hat diesen kothigten Aufenthalt schon zweymahl zu reinigen gesucht, und durch seine Flammen in Schutt und Asche verkehret. Allein dieses hat nur darzu gedienet, ihre Häusser desto schneller wieder aufzubauen und den Raum in der Luft zu suchen, den man ihnen auf der Erde nicht vergönnet; dann sie dörrfen sich nicht ausserhalb ihren Ringmauren ausbreiten. Je mehr sie sich also eingesperrt sehen und einander über den Köpfen sitzen, je besser geht auch bey ihnen die Vermehrung von statten: es wimmelt und grabelt darinnen alles mit hebräischen Figuren. Fragt man, wovon sich dieses alte Überbleibsel der zwölf israelitischen Stämme nährt, so heißt es, vom Betrug.¹⁸

He does admit, however, that among that "knaveish people" there were some honest Jews who observed the commandments and could put Christian merchants to shame.¹⁹ The Court Councillor Andreas Meyer of Brandenburg, passing through Frankfurt in 1771, makes no such concessions. He says that the clothing order of previous times was no longer considered necessary for identifying the "sly Hebrews" as they could as readily be recognised by their "rascally expressions." The Judengasse, "a narrow, almost quarter-of-an-hour long alley full of excrement and filth," presented to him "every imaginable obnoxiousness," from the inhabitants themselves, who crept around like vermin in their stinking hovels, to their cuisine, which he described with crude sarcasm as superb, and could, he warned, cause a delicate stomach to react in an unpleasant way.²⁰ A citizen of Frankfurt of the name of J. A. Behrens wrote that most Jews, whether they were wealthy traders, women, children or students, hardly left the ghetto more than once a year, with the result that haemorrhoids, scabies, running

¹⁸ Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 177. [The Jews live in these swampiest of spots like vermin in dung. Fire had twice tried to purify this slimy habitat and had reduced it by its flames to rubble and ashes. However, this only served to make them rebuild their houses all the faster and to search in the air for space which had not been granted them on earth, for they are not allowed to spread beyond the walls encircling them. The more they feel locked in and sit on top of each other, the better they propagate: the place is creeping and crawling with Hebrew figures. To the question of how this ancient remainder of the twelve Israelite tribes nourishes itself, the answer is by fraud.]

¹⁹ Ibid., 178.

²⁰ Andreas Meyer, *Briefe eines jungen Reisenden durch Liefland, Kurland und Deutschland* (Erlangen, 1777), cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 178-79.

sores and fistulas had made their permanent home in the Judengasse.²¹

Adolf von Knigge, who visited Frankfurt in the same year as Meyer (1771), was one of the very few German commentators who placed the blame for the living conditions he observed in the Judengasse squarely where it belonged — at the feet of the Christian community. In *Roman meines Lebens* [Story of My Life, 1783] he goes beyond a mere expression of abhorrence at the state of the ghetto by placing it in its historical context. He fills in the blanks of causality left tendentiously ignored in the commentaries of his fellow gentiles, reminding the reader that the German Jews, once craftsmen, wine-growers and gardeners, had been forced against their will predominantly into the practices of usury and peddling and enclosed in ghettos by ecclesiastical ordinances:

Einige tausend gedrückte, verstoßene, zum Theil sehr arme Geschöpfe leben hier eingekerkert, in kleinen schmutzigen, oft fünf Stockwerk hohen Häusern, dürfen in keinem andern Theil der Stadt wohnen, ja! nicht einmal zu jeder Zeit noch an jedem Orte spazieren gehn. — Das ist unsre christliche Art mit einem Volke umzugehen, das dieselben Freyheitsrechte der Menschheit wie wir hat, von welchem wir auf gewisse Art abstammen, das wenigstens mehr Originalität, Eigenheit, und mehr Reinigkeit der Sitten unter sich erhalten hat, als wir, und welches wir nun zwingen, indem wir ihm, auf die unedelste Art, alle Mittel zu andrem Erwerbe abschneiden, sich vom Wucher zu ernähren.²²

In *Merkwürdige Reisebeschreibungen für die Jugend* [A Memorable Travelogue for Our Youth, 1779], the publisher and pedagogue Joachim Heinrich Campe took a position similar to that of Knigge towards the Judengasse. He estimated the total number of inhabitants of the ghetto as being ten thousand, a figure corroborated by the American travel writer John Trumbull, who had visited the ghetto in 1786 and wrote about it in his *Autobiography* (1841).²³ Campe claims that this represents the densest population anywhere in the whole world — a situation, he says, that was exacerbated by the practice of

²¹ Cit. in Kracauer, *Geschichte der Juden in Frankfurt*, II: 223.

²² Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 179. [Several thousand dejected, outcast, partially very impoverished creatures live incarcerated here, in small, dirty houses often five storeys high, and are not allowed to live in any other part of the city, indeed, even to stroll outside whenever they wanted. — That is our Christian way of treating a people who have the same human right to freedom as we have, from whom we are descended, so to speak, who have preserved more originality, uniqueness and purity of morals than we, and whom we now force to live from usury by thwarting every possibility of an alternative means of living in the most dishonourable way.]

²³ *Ibid.*, 182. Kracauer cites an anonymous travel writer who also put the figure at 10,000, although Kracauer himself considers 3,000 to be more realistic. See Kracauer, *Geschichte der Juden in Frankfurt am Main*, II: 231.

locking the occupants in on Sundays and Christian holidays like wrongdoers, to which end this "Judenkerker" [Jewish dungeon] had been equipped with a gate:

Ich sah an einem solchen Tage durch dies Thor hinein, und erschrak über den Anblick. Das Steinpflaster war mit Kindern bedeckt; die Treppen, Schwellen und Dielen konnten vor Menschen kaum gesehen werden, und aus den Fenstern von unten bis unters Dach ragte eine unzählbare Menge von Köpfen hervor, die alle nach Luft zu schnappen schienen.²⁴

Why on earth, he asked his fellow Christians, are these people treated so harshly on the very day when Christians indulge most in pleasure, and received the stock reply that if such an impertinent and presumptuous people as they had the liberty to go out on Holy Days, the Christians would have to do completely without the pleasure of taking strolls because the Jews would obstruct their path in hordes. Campe later received the added explanation — so typical of oppressor groups' propagandist strategy of inverting the roles of aggressor and victim — that if one were not to implement such measures to restrict one's "Schützlinge" [charges] in every possible way, they would ultimately drive the Christians out of their own city.²⁵ On visiting Frankfurt in 1788 and asking the same question as Campe, Wilhelm von Humboldt was told by L. F. Göritz (who was later to write a biography of Schiller) that not only were the paths and promenades too narrow for both Christians and Jews but the Jews constantly smoked tobacco, which could offend the nostrils of the strolling Christians. Humboldt, of course, saw through Göritz's rationalisation, referring to it as a "Beschönigung seiner Intoleranz" [glossing over of his intolerance].²⁶

In *Das Labyrinth oder Reise durch Deutschland in die Schweiz 1789* [The Labyrinth or a Journey through Germany to Switzerland, 1789; published 1793-95], the Danish writer Jens Baggesen expressed his disgust at the ruling that Jews could neither live nor even stroll outside the Judengasse, remarking that even the immortal Moses Mendelssohn, whenever he visited Frankfurt, had been compelled to live in this "pestilential street." Of all the descriptions of the ghetto of the time, his is the most drastic. He invites the reader to imagine thousands of ragged men, thousands of half-naked women and thousands of stark naked children herded together in one small lane such as the Peer-Madsen-Gang in Copenhagen and teeming through the street and

²⁴ Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, 181. [On one such day I looked through the gate and was alarmed by what I saw. The cobbles were covered with children; the stairs, thresholds and hallways could hardly be seen for all the people, and out of the windows from below to right under the roof there protruded innumerable heads that all seemed to be gasping for air.]

²⁵ Ibid., 182.

²⁶ Ibid., 183.

in the hallways and staircases like maggots wriggling in cheese. He felt forced to resort to his walking stick to drive off the hordes of haggling vendors who fell upon him "like a swarm of hungry ravens." On the other hand, he accompanied some of the pedlars on their daily rounds from door to door to attain a greater insight into the desperate hardships and endless humiliations of their way of life, and seems to have been one of the few non-Jewish visitors to venture into the interiors of the houses, where he came face to face with the anomalies of the Judengasse. He followed a trader of second-hand clothes up the steps of a tower that was "as dark as the grave in the middle of the day," catching glimpses of grimy side-rooms packed with women and children (the trader's own family "literally wallowing in a grim hovel") and climbing all the way up to the attic, where "the sun shone on a scene of pomp and wretchedness" the likes of which he had never encountered anywhere in the world.

Einige hundert Barone, Offiziere, Kopfwerks- und Handwerksburschen, Stutzer und Spießbürger *ohne Inhalt* hingen und lagen hier durch- und übereinander. Wir bestaunten alle diese *Menschenhüllen* und vor allem die ungeheuere Menge von glänzend bestickten Westen — ich glaube nicht, daß es im ganzen Königreich Dänemark so viele gibt.²⁷

He concludes his extremely vivid impressions of misery and squalor by asking how it was possible that in his day and age — the eighteenth century since the promulgation of the law of Jesus Christ's universal and all-inclusive love — *an entire people*, from generation to generation, with all its individuals whether already alive or yet to be born, could be thought of as not belonging to the human race, as being politically non-existent and destined for eternal banishment.²⁸

And yet some travel writers still contrived to lay the blame for the Frankfurt ghetto with the Jews themselves. Both Count Friedrich Leopold Stolberg and Johann Gottlieb Herrmann stated in 1791 that the ghetto continued to exist only because of the greed of the occupants, Stolberg claiming that the rich inhabitants resisted change because they stood to lose their profits from rents exacted from poorer inhabitants if the ghetto were ever abolished.²⁹ Herrmann saw in the ghetto the most convincing proof of how far human greed could go,

²⁷ Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 187. [Several hundred barons, officers, apprentice brainworkers and craftsmen, dandies and petite-bourgeois without content hung and lay around and above each other. We stared in astonishment at these human husks and above all the enormous number of glitteringly embroidered waistcoats — I hardly think that there are so many in the entire kingdom of Denmark.]

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁹ Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg, *Reise in Deutschland, der Schweiz, Italien und Sizilien* (Königsberg and Leipzig, 1784), cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 192.

arguing that if he had the choice, he would far prefer to carry out the hardest labour or even go begging as long as it were in the open air, whereas in the stinking hole of the Judengasse, which was often locked up for days on end, there lived people with a fortune amounting to tons of gold.³⁰ In contrast, the Russian scientist Nikolai Michailowitsch Karamsin, visiting Germany in 1789 and apparently the only traveller besides the Dane Jens Baggesen to actually enter Jewish dwellings and seek dialogue with a broad range of occupants, established in *Briefe eines reisenden Russen* [Letters of a Travelling Russian, 1799] that there was far more solidarity and community spirit to be observed among the Jews than among the more flourishing Christians outside the ghetto due to the common plight suffered by the former.³¹

The Judengasse was soon afterwards, first through a fortuity of history and subsequently a political intervention, abolished as a ghetto (if not a Jewish quarter, as Jewish citizens would continue to live in the street for a long time afterwards). On the night of 13 July 1796, during the French siege of Frankfurt, the bombardment of the city by French artillery set fire to the Northern end of the Judengasse, destroying about 140 houses and rendering some 1800 inhabitants homeless, most of whom had to be rehoused further East beyond the walls of the ghetto. In 1797, Johann Wolfgang Goethe made a case in his *Reise in die Schweiz* [Journey to Switzerland] for using the opportunity to extend the ghetto, but as Bettina Mähler and Hans Sarkowicz have pointed out, it did not occur to Goethe to demand its abolition.³² His youthful correspondent Bettina von Arnim took up a commendably clearer position,³³ writing in April 1808 that the Jews should be permitted to enjoy freedom. "Zu Christen will man sie absolut machen, aber aus ihrem engen Fegefeuer der überfüllten Judengasse, will man sie nicht herauslassen"³⁴ [While people are determined to make them into Christians, they do not want to release them from the cramped purgatory of the Judengasse]. In a short story, *Die Klosterbeere* [The Convent Berry], written in the same year and, as the subtitle expressly states, "in remembrance of the Judengasse," Arnim deliberately contradicts the stereotyping prevalent in the imaging of Jews, not only with regard to their physiognomy but also the reason for their hectic street peddling,

³⁰ Johann Gottlieb Herrmann, *Bemerkungen auf einer Reise von Gotha nach Mainz bei Gelegenheit der Kaiserkrönung Leopolds II* (Frankfurt and Leipzig), cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 192.

³¹ Nikolai Michailowitsch Karamsin, *Briefe eines reisenden Russen* (Leipzig, 1799), cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 194.

³² Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 208.

³³ Cf. Norbert Oellers, "Goethe und Schiller in ihrem Verhältnis zum Judentum," in *Conditio Judaica: Judentum, Antisemitismus und deutschsprachige Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Hans Otto Horch and Horst Denkler (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), I: 127-28.

³⁴ Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 225.

which was more often than not, as Jens Baggesen had already observed, motivated by the desperate need to provide for their families against all odds:

In dieser heißen Sommernacht nehm' ich oft durch die Judengasse meinen Weg zum Treibhaus, dort die Blumen zu betrachten. Nun gehe ich nicht mehr gleichgültig schüchtern an des weisen Nathan Brüdern vorüber, ich betrachte mit Verwunderung die engen dunklen Häuser; alles wimmelt, kein Plätzchen zum Alleinsein, zum Besinnen. Manch schönes Kinderauge und feingebildete Nasen und blasse Mädchenwangen füllen die engen Fensterräume, Luft zu schöpfen, und die Väter in den Haustüren fallen die Vorübergehenden an mit ihrem Schacher. Ein Volksstrom wogt in der Straße, da laufen so viele Kinder herum in Lumpen, die lernen Geld erwerben, und die Alten, Tag und Nacht, sind eifrig, sie in Wohlstand zu bringen, das wehrt man ihnen und schimpft sie lästig.³⁵

On her return from the greenhouse the narrator once more passes through the Judengasse with a large bunch of rosebuds, carnations and other flowers, which she distributes among the Jewish children.

Viele Händchen strecken sich mir entgegen, sie werfen die Bettelsäcke ab, die reinen Blumen zu erfassen — sie sahen nicht nach der Münze, zwischen den Blumen auf meinem Schoß. — Sind sie nicht dieselben, von denen Christus sagt: "Lasset sie zu mir kommen"? — Und die jungen Mädchen kamen auch herab und steckten ihre Sträußchen in den Busen und sagten voll Vergnügen: "Ach, das ist was Rares."³⁶

Goethe's own reminiscences of the Judengasse are, in contrast, on the whole, dour, at worst downright prejudiced and at best somewhat condescending:

Die Enge, der Schmutz, das Gewimmel, der Akzent einer unerfreulichen Sprache, alles zusammen machte den unangenehmsten Eindruck, wenn

³⁵ Cit. in Wolf, *Frankfurt am Main: Jüdisches Städtebild*, 73. [In this hot summer night I often make my way through the Jewish ghetto to the greenhouse, to take a look at the flowers there. I no longer pass the brothers of the wise Nathan with indifferent reserve, but rather observe the cramped, dark houses with amazement; everything is in motion, there is no place to be alone, to contemplate. Some lovely children's eyes and finely formed noses and pallid girls' cheeks fill the narrow window openings to get a breath of air, while their fathers in the house entrances set upon the passers-by with their haggling. A flood of people surges through the street, and so many children run around in rags learning how to make money while day and night their elders are eager to provide for them — and for that they are castigated and called a nuisance.]

³⁶ Ibid., 74. [Many little hands are stretched out towards me, they throw away their beggars' sacks to grasp the pristine flowers — they ignored the coin on my lap between the flowers. — Are they not the same as those of whom Christ said: "Suffer them to come unto me?" — And the girls, too, came down from above and stuck posies into their bodices and exclaimed full of pleasure: "Aha, that's so rare."]

man auch nur am Tore vorbeigehend hineinsah. Es dauerte lange, bis ich allein mich hineinwagte, und ich kehrte nicht leicht wieder dahin zurück, wenn ich einmal den Zudringlichkeiten so vieler etwas zu schwachem unermüdet fordernder oder anbietender Menschen entgangen war.³⁷

When Goethe does compliment the Jews of Frankfurt, it is in order to set his own magnanimity into relief: the Jews, he says, were despite everything the Chosen People and were a living testimony to ancient times. Besides, he adds patronisingly, they were human after all, and even the stubbornness with which they adhered to their customs could not but evince some respect. Moreover, the girls were pretty and suffered gladly a Christian youth who took well-disposed notice of them on encountering them in the Fischerfeld on the Sabbath.

Ludwig Börne's descriptions of the conditions within the Judengasse are more harrowing than all previous depictions. But even allowing for the literary and polemical device of hyperbole, they have to bear special weight, as he was born and brought up there. His is an authentic voice from within. On his return in 1807 after completing his medicine and political science studies in the university cities of Berlin, Halle and Gießen, the Judengasse must have seemed particularly oppressive. He speaks of the stifling heat compared to the relative coolness of the rest of the city,³⁸ a nauseous smell such that one was obliged to wear a handkerchief over the mouth to avoid infection, and the muck in the street so deep that one's stride was slowed down wading through it:

Scheu und behutsam wird der Fuß aufgesetzt, damit er keine Kinder zertrete. Diese schwimmen in der Gosse herum, sie kriechen im Kote umher, unzählig wie ein Gewürm von der Sonne Kraft dem Miste ausgebrütet. Wer gönnte nicht den armen Knaben ihre kleine Lust? Haben sie doch keinen Hofraum, kein Gärtchen im Innern des Hauses, wo sie ihre kindlichen Spiele ausüben können.³⁹

³⁷ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1982), IX: 149-50. [The confinement, the filth, the mêlée, the accent of an unpleasant language — all these things together made a most disagreeable impression, even when one did no more than to cast a glance inside on passing the gate. It took some time before I dared enter, and I did not readily return once I had escaped the obtrusiveness of so many people tirelessly intent on demanding and offering wares to peddle.]

³⁸ Börne, *Die Juden in Frankfurt am Main*, in *Ludwig Börne zum zweihundertsten Geburtstag: Für die Juden*, ed. Renate Heuer (Frankfurt am Main: Archiv Bibliotheca Judaica, 1986), 5. This book collects most of Börne's writings on the theme of Jewry.

³⁹ Cit. in Mähler and Sarkowicz, "Die Frankfurter Judengasse," 198. [Each step is taken gingerly and with care so that no children are trampled on. They swim around in the gutter and creep about in the muck, innumerable as worms hatched in manure by the heat of the sun. Who would begrudge the poor urchins

And yet, critical though Börne was of the Jewish ghetto and of the mentalities it engendered within and without, there is one passage that bears out what Karamsin said of the community life of the ghetto, except that it has less to do with solidarity than with the enforced outdoor scenario of familial and social relationships in a very densely populated area, that is, the street life of the ghetto, a milieu that has been conveyed in much ghetto literature. Börne writes:

Wenn die Judenschaft ihre Gasse als einen großen Familiensaal zu betrachten pflegte, worin sie alles das tun und und unterlassen durfte, was man in seinem Hause zu verrichten und zu unterlassen gewohnt ist, so konnte der äußere Anstand unmöglich dabei gewinnen. Am Sabbat sah man die Herrn in Schlafrock und Pantoffel, die Damen in ihren Nachthauben herumspazieren. Die jungen Frauen zeigten sich in Negligés, als wären sie in ihren Schlafstuben. Sie saßen auf Bänken vor ihren Häusern und deklamierten Schillers Gedichte. Sie nahmen daselbst ganz ungeniert die Besuche ihrer Liebhaber an. Man trank auf der Straße seinen Kaffee, man rauchte, man zankte, man küßte sich; kurz, man tat wie zu Hause.⁴⁰

The fact that Börne was acquainted with the vibrant public interaction of ghetto life does not equal a nostalgic endorsement. For him political action was the paramount concern, and bitter irony his way of exposing the whole gamut of Christian rationalisations designed to disguise their bigotry and prevent change.⁴¹

[Die Juden] erfreuten sich der zärtlichsten Sorgfalt ihrer Regierung. Sonntags durften sie ihre Gasse nicht verlassen, damit sie von Betrunknen keine Schläge bekämen. Vor dem 25. Jahre durften sie nicht heiraten, damit ihre Kinder stark und gesund würden. An Feiertagen durften sie erst um sechs Uhr abends zum Tore hinausgehen, daß die allzu große Sonnenhitze ihnen nicht schade. Die öffentlichen Spaziergänge außerhalb der Stadt waren ihnen untersagt, man nötigte sie ins Feld zu wandern, um ihren Sinn für Landwirtschaft zu erwecken. Ging ein Jude über die Straße, und ein Christ rief ihm zu: *Mach Mores, Jud*, so mußte er seinen Hut abziehen; durch diese höfliche Aufmerksamkeit sollte die Liebe zwischen bei-

their modest pleasure? After all, they have neither courtyard nor small garden within their houses to play their little games.]

⁴⁰ Ibid., 203. [Since the Jewish people were accustomed to treating their street as a vast living room in which they were allowed to do as they pleased just as in their own house, public decency had to lose out. On the Sabbath one saw the men strolling about in their night gowns and slippers and the women in their nightcaps. The young women showed themselves in their negligées as if they were in their bedrooms. They sat on benches in front of their houses and recited Schiller's poems. And on the same spot they received visits from their beaux without the slightest embarrassment. People drank their coffee on the street, they smoked, quarrelled, kissed one another; in short, they behaved as if they were at home.]

⁴¹ Cf. Paul Arnsberg, *Die Geschichte der Frankfurter Juden seit der Französischen Revolution* (Darmstadt: Eduard Roether, 1983), I: 121-37.

den Religionsparteien gefestigt werden. Mehrere Straßen der Stadt, die ein schlechtes unbequemes Pflaster hatten, durften sie niemals betreten.⁴²

Börne witnessed the belated abolition of the Frankfurt ghetto. However, only five years after the real ghetto gates had been opened for good (1808), only two years after the Jews of Frankfurt had been granted civil rights by Theodor von Dalberg, Grand Duke by Napoleon's mercy (1811), the reformer was expelled and a reactionary city council overturned his enlightened measures. The police clerk Ludwig Börne was sacked from his position (at the very same time as his brother Philipp was fighting in the so-called Wars of Liberation as a sergeant of the Frankfurt Volunteers⁴³), for one reason only — because he was a Jew. Though the physical ghetto had been finally abolished, it was, in the reactionary climate of post-Napoleonic Europe, swiftly replaced by other forms of social, cultural and political marginalisation. The repeal of liberal emancipatory achievements in most territories of the Deutscher Bund pushed Jews into a ghetto of a different kind — a ghetto of political discrimination and humiliating rebuffs of their emancipatory and assimilatory aspirations.

⁴² Ludwig Börne, *Juden in der freien Stadt Frankfurt* (1820), in *Ludwig Börne zum zweihundertsten Geburtstag*, 30. [The Jews enjoyed the tenderest care of their government. On Sundays they were not allowed to leave the ghetto so that they would not be beaten up by drunks. They were not allowed to marry before their twenty-fifth year so that their children might become strong and healthy. On holidays they were only allowed out of the gate at six o'clock in the evening so that the all too intensive heat of the sun would not harm them. The public promenades on the outside of the city were prohibited to them, and instead they were forced to walk out into the countryside in order to awaken their feeling for agriculture. If a Jew crossed the street and a Christian shouted at him: *Show your manners, Jew*, then he had to doff his hat; by this polite gesture the love felt for one another by the two religious groups was to be strengthened. Several streets that had a defective and uncomfortable surface were entirely out of bounds for the Jews.]

⁴³ See Wolf, *Frankfurt am Main: Jüdisches Städtebild*, 13.