

Before the Revolution



Some forty thousand Jews lived within the borders of what would become the modern French state in the years immediately before the French Revolution, but there was no “French Jewish community.” Instead, four very different settlements of Jews, with few contacts among them, made up the small Jewish population of France. With the exception of a tiny unauthorized settlement of several hundred Jews in Paris, all lived on the periphery of the kingdom: in the southwest, the southeast, and the northeast. Their separate geography reflected their disparate origins: the Sephardi culture of the Iberian peninsula; the Provençal communities of the papal states in France; and the traditional Ashkenazi world of central Europe. Irrespective of the origins of these communities, neither the authorities nor the local populace would have considered them French; indeed, few of these Jews would have deemed themselves so.

In the eighteenth century the Jews of France were preoccupied with matters other than their national identity. As heirs to the medieval legacy of Jews in Christian Europe, they were worried about maintaining their right of residency, an expensive privilege for which they paid each ruler dearly. Because of the division of sovereignty among the king and local seigneurs, Jews had to negotiate with many different authorities for that right. Jews were also eager to reduce their tax burden while expanding

their limited economic opportunities, yet they accepted the conditions under which Jews had lived throughout Europe since the Middle Ages. In return for a variety of fiscal payments, assessed upon the local Jewish community as a whole, Jews were permitted to reside in specific places and to engage in a limited number of commercial pursuits, especially moneylending and the sale of secondhand goods. Because they were generally not permitted to own land or to join artisan guilds, they filled a particular economic niche, differing substantially in socioeconomic terms from the Christian masses, who were overwhelmingly peasants.

As a tolerated alien group, Jews formed a separate corporation, or self-governing community, in a society in which membership in a social order determined individual status, whether nobility, clergy, or the commoner classes of urban bourgeoisie or rural peasantry. Belonging to the Jewish community was yet another form of social and legal identification, not exactly part of the general social order but parallel to it. The Jewish corporate community was entitled to maintain a range of religious and philanthropic institutions and to govern itself according to its own law (*halakha*) in all matters involving its members. Although they suffered societal antipathy, Jews were free to practice their Judaism, a relatively recent right in some parts of France. Despite their diverse origins and culture, in the eighteenth century the Jews of France all lived in one variation or another of this traditional *kahal* (community).¹

The French crown valued most the Jewish merchants of the southwest, whose two major communities were located in Bordeaux and Saint-Esprit (a suburb of Bayonne). By the second half of the eighteenth century the dominant figures in these communities engaged successfully in international commerce that contributed to France's Atlantic trade. The Jews of Bordeaux and Bayonne enjoyed the most advantageous legal status and were the most acculturated of all of France's Jews in their dress, language, and general culture. Both these distinctions were due to their Marrano origins and their arrival in France under the guise of Portuguese merchants.²

The Marranos, or New Christians, were fifteenth-century Spanish and Portuguese Jewish converts to Christianity, many of whom retained a private identity as Jews and secretly practiced aspects of Judaism. Watched vigilantly and persecuted by the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, they frequently left the Iberian Peninsula for less dangerous spots within Europe. Not all Marranos were actual Judaizers or eager to return to Judaism. However, even many sincere New Christians felt the need to emigrate since all Christians of Jewish origins were suspect in

the eyes of the Inquisition. Among the Marranos the Portuguese were the most likely to be secret Jews, for they were the descendants of the most loyal Jews of Spain. When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, in the throes of their conquest and unification of all of Spain, in 1492 had given Jews the choice between exile and apostasy, the greatest number of those who chose exile settled in neighboring Portugal. Five years later, ironically, they were forced to accept baptism, with no option for voluntary exile. The Marranos who formed the nucleus of France's Sephardi Jewish communities emigrated from Portugal and received commercial and residential rights initially as members of the "Portuguese Nation."³

The first Portuguese merchants arrived in Bordeaux in the early sixteenth century when, in the aftermath of war with England, the king of France was encouraging foreigners to settle in the depopulated city. In 1550 King Henry II officially recognized and endorsed their presence by issuing the first letters patent to the "merchants and other Portuguese called New Christians."⁴ Renewed by successive monarchs, the letters patent did more than ensure the Sephardi Jews the right to reside and do business in France; they also provided the basis for the later Sephardi claim that their civic equality preceded the Revolution.

By the second half of the seventeenth century the Portuguese Marranos felt secure enough to cast off gradually the mask of their Catholicism. The acquisition of separate cemeteries for the group enabled them to take the first steps of emerging openly as Jews. Thus, in Bayonne, for example, the last entry of a Marrano's death in the local parish register and the first biblical name inscribed in a Hebraic transliteration on a tombstone in the cemetery allocated to the Portuguese merchants both occurred in 1659. Gradually, the Marranos ceased to mark all their rites of passage in the Church, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century they were generally recognized to be Jews. Indeed, in 1723 Louis XV renewed the privileges of the earlier letters patent, specifically acknowledging that the Portuguese merchants were actually Jews.⁵

Why did the Catholic kingdom of France, that had expelled its Jews in the fourteenth century and its Protestants less than forty years before the 1723 letters patent, agree to recognize the presence of Jews on French soil and confirm their rights to remain there and conduct their business? The answer lies primarily in their economic utility. Local Jewish merchants of the southwest provided an important credit function as bankers and brokers. The French state's growing willingness to privilege economic utility over religious conformity led to an appreciation of the Jewish contribution to a region then in straitened economic circumstances

but of considerable potential. Indeed, the lesson derived from the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes was the heavy price that religious conflict exacted from the French economy. Royal acceptance of Jewish merchants because of their economic utility, as well as crucial support in Bordeaux of the local *parlement* (a court with jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters), thus enabled the “Portuguese merchants” to consolidate their privileges as Jews on French soil.⁶

In their transition from Portuguese to Jewish merchants, the Jews of Bordeaux and Saint-Esprit established the institutional structure that would govern their communities until the Revolution. The central communal body in Bordeaux, the most influential Sephardi settlement, was the *sedaca* (communal charitable fund), set up in 1699 to enable Jews to care for their own poor. The parallel organization in the larger community of Saint-Esprit, established somewhat earlier, was called the *hebera*. Although philanthropic in its origins, the *sedaca*, as well as the *hebera*, developed most of the characteristics of a full-fledged self-governing Jewish community. Dominated by an oligarchy of officials called syndics, the *sedaca* levied substantial taxes on its members, including direct levies and the traditional tax on kosher meat, and controlled entry into the community. Though there were no public synagogues, it provided for the religious needs of the Jews with prayer groups in private homes, a ritual bath (*mikveh*), ritually fit meat and *matzah*, primary schools, and cemeteries. Like all Jewish communities, particularly where Jews were a vulnerable minority without fixed rights, its wealthy leaders assumed the responsibility to bargain with the appropriate authorities to secure legal privileges. Unlike a typical premodern Jewish community, the Sephardi communities never acquired the right to judge cases involving Jews according to their own law. In the southwestern communities Jews took their civil cases to French courts.⁷

On the eve of the Revolution the Sephardi Jews of the southwest numbered about five thousand. Approximately two thousand Jews lived in relative security in Bordeaux and twenty-five hundred or so in somewhat less security in Saint-Esprit, with tens of Jews in smaller settlements in the region.⁸ Although most Sephardim were small or middling merchants, the image of the community in its own eyes as well as in the mind of governmental officials was set by its most successful members, the 30 percent in banking and large-scale commerce, who served as its leaders. According to available documents, they seem to have earned the respect of the Gentile elite, who often attested to their honesty and probity. Moreover, at least one observer commented that at one Jewish wedding

“the majority of the guests were Christians of the best families.”⁹ Prosperous bankers and large-stakes players in trade with the New World, members of the Jewish upper classes seem to have had a more relaxed attitude toward strict religious observance than was the case among other Jews in France. They were also open to the secular culture around them and by the third quarter of the century had introduced French and arithmetic into their communal schools while excluding the study of Talmud. The Sephardim also boasted a number of intellectuals and professionals who had achieved respect in society at large, including physicians and a noted teacher of deaf-mutes. They were, in short, acculturated to the urban bourgeoisie among whom they lived.¹⁰

The Sephardim saw themselves as an acculturated elite among Jews, and certainly among the Jews living in France. In a document which they prepared in 1788 when the status of the Jews of the kingdom was under discussion in Paris, the Jews of Bordeaux made clear their claim to be distinguished from non-Sephardi Jews, and especially from the Ashkenazim of the northeast, because of their legal status, level of acculturation, and manner of living as Jews. Thus, the Bordeaux Jews contrasted themselves to good advantage with the Ashkenazim (whom they called Germans):

The Germans almost everywhere have long beards; their dress distinguishes them everywhere they live; the Portuguese, on the other hand, except for their religious belief, differ in no respect from the peoples among whom they live; they adopt their manners and customs. A Portuguese Jew is English in England and French in France, but a German Jew is German everywhere with regard to his customs. . . .¹¹

The Sephardim even attributed these differences to their noble lineage:

The Spanish and Portuguese Jews are persuaded that they are the issue of the tribe of Judah; it is known that this tribe held the highest rank among the others . . . The idea [of being descended from Judah] . . . could only confer upon them that distinction and contribute to that elevation of sentiment that have been remarked in them and that their brethren of other nations seem to have recognized.¹²

Governmental officials confirmed the self-image of the Sephardi Jews. In 1781 in response to an inquiry from the Conseil d'État in Paris, then considering ways to diminish the Jewish population of the northeastern provinces, the intendant of the province of Guienne, the home of the Sephardi communities, wrote of the Jews in his district that “despite the reigning prejudice of long-standing, most pursue their business with probity and there was nothing more to say on their account than about Catholics and Protestants of similar standing.” He also communicated

to the Conseil d'État a subsequent letter from the Bordeaux subdelegate confirming the irreproachable behavior of the Jews, their care of their own poor, who were never seen begging, as well as their considerable economic utility.¹³ For men of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment the Sephardim were the model to which all Jews should aspire. For the Sephardi Jews themselves, the assertion of the distinctiveness of their cultural heritage and legal status in France became a central plank in the political arguments they presented in defense of their status both at the end of the ancien régime and during the years of the Revolution.

The Sephardim of the southwest attempted to maintain their distinctiveness even from the other Jews who lived in southern France, the “papal Jews” of the four urban communities of Avignon, Carpentras, Cavaillon, and l'Isle-sur-Sorgue, which were under the control of the pope from the end of the thirteenth century until 1791.¹⁴ When Jews from these communities tried during the eighteenth century to join their fellow Jews in Bordeaux and Saint-Esprit, they encountered resistance from Sephardi leaders, who feared they might lose control over the community and might have to support the indigent among the newcomers. Yet the Jews from the papal states succeeded, particularly in the last half of the century, in planting themselves within the established Sephardi communities and in extending Jewish settlement, without legal support, into provinces contiguous with the papal states. By the end of the century Jews originally from the papal states could be found in Paris and Lyon, in Nîmes and Montpellier. So eager were the papal Jews to break out of their restricted area of residence and take advantage of economic opportunities elsewhere that the Jewish population of the four communities declined precipitously by the end of the century. No more than twenty-five hundred Jews lived in the papal states on the eve of the French Revolution.

Although the papal Jews did not live under French sovereignty until the area was annexed during the Revolution, they shared many of the characteristics of their Jewish neighbors dwelling on French soil in the southwest, though they retained some distinctive ritual customs. Relatively well integrated into their local milieu, they spoke the local Provençal dialect as well as a Jewish version of it. Although they had been restricted, like most Jews in France, to petty commerce and money-lending, they had expanded and diversified their economic activity in the course of the eighteenth century. Many Jews prospered through commerce in horses and donkeys and trade in raw silk and jewels. They spent greater periods of time pursuing their economic interests outside

of their communities at fairs in the French provinces, sometimes rousing the opposition of local Christian merchants. Their new wealth permitted all four of the papal Jewish communities to reconstruct their synagogues during the eighteenth century. Most importantly, with commercial growth came increased economic contact with members of the French bourgeoisie and the nobility. With time these Christians expressed less contempt for their Jewish economic contacts. The very eagerness of the Jews of the papal states to extend their economic activity in the neighboring French countryside and to markets in the interior of France, and to settle in new areas, suggests their sense of connectedness to the larger geographical entity of France even though they were not French subjects.¹⁵

Their heightened awareness of the disparity between their economic and social success and their legal status also encouraged Jews of the papal states to emigrate. In their four communities the Jews lived in horribly overcrowded ghettos called *carrières* that were closed at night. They were also subject to a variety of disabilities imposed by the Catholic church to demonstrate Jewish social inferiority. They were legally constrained, for example, to wear distinguishing marks upon their clothing—a yellow hat for males—and to refrain from working publicly upon Sunday or employing Christian servants, though in practice enforcement of these regulations varied. Because of Church policy they had to hide their Hebrew books, and they feared the secret baptism of their children by zealous servants. As late as 1781 an edict reinforced the system of a closed ghetto with a Christian gatekeeper paid by the Jews.

Like the Sephardim of Bordeaux and Bayonne, the Jews of the Comtat and Avignon maintained organized, self-governing communities whose philanthropic development was far more impressive than their contribution to traditional Jewish learning. As their population declined in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the communities encountered financial difficulties and were unable to find sufficient personnel to staff their institutions. Jews planning to slip into the neighboring provinces of France simply refused to pay their communal taxes, and on the eve of the Revolution the *carrières* were deeply in debt.¹⁶

The newest of France's Jewish settlements existed in a semi-clandestine, but increasingly secure, situation in Paris.¹⁷ Migrating from the three established centers of Jewish life in France, a handful of Jews arrived in Paris at the beginning of the eighteenth century; on the eve of the Revolution the Jewish population numbered some five hundred individuals. However, this multiethnic Jewish group did not constitute a

community like those found among the Sephardim, the Ashkenazim, or the papal Jews. Parisian Jews lacked formal recognition and therefore could not maintain the institutional infrastructure that characterized their communities of origin, although they doubtless maintained modest houses of prayer; moreover, they owned three cemeteries by the second half of the century. Most Jews plied their petty trades in the streets of Paris, seeking to blend into the urban population. Their presence in Paris was to prove important when the city became the political center of the Revolution.

If the Sephardim and the papal Jews provoked little public discussion due to their small numbers and their relatively high level of acculturation, the overwhelming majority of the Jews of France—about thirty thousand persons—living in the northeastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine attracted considerable attention from both Enlightenment thinkers and royal officials in the last years of the *ancien régime*. The Jews of Alsace and Lorraine were Ashkenazi Jews, the westernmost outpost of the Yiddish-speaking Jews of central Europe, part of a cultural community that extended eastward to Poland. Even in the eighteenth century many of the Jews in the two provinces had come originally from German lands. France had acquired these Jews as a consequence of the expansion of her territorial holdings on the northeastern frontier in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially through the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648.¹⁸

The Jews of the northeastern provinces lived scattered among hundreds of small communities under the protection of many local authorities, both secular and clerical. On the eve of the Revolution, the vast majority made their home in Alsace, in more than 180 communities. Although exact numbers are hard to determine, because Jews without fixed or legal residence evaded the census takers in 1784, it has been estimated that at that time there were at least 22,500 Jews in the province.¹⁹ Cities in Alsace jealously guarded the right to exclude Jews; consequently no Jews resided in Strasbourg, for example, although they entered the city on a daily basis, and paid a tax—also levied on animals—to conduct business there. The city of Metz, which hosted the largest Jewish community of Lorraine, was the cultural center of Ashkenazi Jewry in France. In the eighteenth century Jews had also settled in the city of Nancy. Yet most Jews of the northeastern provinces lived in villages and small towns, primarily in Alsace but also in the countryside of Lorraine and the neighboring region. Only a few dozen Jewish communities numbered more than two hundred persons, and in the majority of communes in Alsace

and Lorraine where Jews resided they made up between 10 and 50 percent of the total population. The milieu of village and small town provided the predominant Jewish social experience and enabled Jews to maintain strong social and cultural bonds while reinforcing their particular economic role in the countryside. Although they traded daily with local peasants and borrowed from local culture, for example in their folk art, Jews constituted a separate society capable of establishing its own norms and enforcing them. Through such diverse means as fines and various forms of social ostracism, including excommunication by the Jewish court, the Jewish communities maintained social order and policed the boundaries of their society. Residential patterns reinforced Jewish separatism. In Metz they lived in a virtual ghetto that was locked at night, and in Jewish communities of any size they occupied their own quarter.²⁰

Despite their concentration in particular neighborhoods of cities and towns, the Jews of the northeastern provinces regularly dealt with the region's rural population in a way that enabled them to carve out a particular economic niche. Legal constraints and the generations-long development of their commercial skills determined their specific economic role. Like most Jews living under Christian rule, the Jews of Alsace and Lorraine were forbidden to own land, to conduct business in public on Sundays or Christian holidays, to join artisan guilds, or to sell new merchandise. Consequently, most male Jews earned their living by peddling in the countryside, bearing in the sacks they carried on their backs a host of small manufactured items that they sold to rural customers who could not make frequent visits to town markets. Other Jews sold old clothes or other used goods in the marketplace. A significant proportion of the Jewish population was involved in cattle trading, and to a lesser extent in the more lucrative trade in horses—an occupation that made them particularly useful as army purveyors in garrison towns like Metz. Because they regularly traversed the countryside, Jews also served as commercial brokers, bringing together peasants with the complementary needs of buying and selling. These instrumental contacts did not lead local peasants, or nobility or bourgeois for that matter, to value or respect Jews, unlike the attitudes of Christian authorities in the south.

As traders, Jews amassed capital on a modest scale that they lent at interest to their peasant customers as one component of a transaction such as the sale of a cow or the purchase of grain. In the absence of banking facilities Jewish moneylenders were a ready source of credit for the peasant. They made small loans, conducting transactions in secret, without recourse to the local notary public, thus enabling the peasant to keep

the details of his financial situation from curious neighbors. Providing credit to peasants in the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, however necessary in economic terms, earned for Jews the image of “the usurer” par excellence in a society in which all moneylending was deemed morally suspect and all interest, no matter how modest, usurious. Peasant resentment of Jewish moneylenders exploded in 1777 when Alsace was flooded with forged receipts for debts owed to Jews, and the Jewish leadership of the region defended its constituents by appealing to the courts as well as by mounting a public relations campaign. More importantly, the cultural construction of the Jew as usurer figured prominently in public opinion on the Jews in France from the end of the ancien régime into the twentieth century and fueled anti-Jewish attitudes.²¹

Despite legal restrictions on Jewish economic activity in Alsace and Lorraine, the law recognized their presence in the region and guaranteed their freedom of worship. The Jews of Metz and parts of Alsace, for example, had been granted letters patent by Louis XIV in 1657.²² Subject to different legal jurisdictions, the Jews of the two provinces were permitted to maintain autonomous communities according to the system that had emerged under medieval Christendom, although their population growth was regulated. Because of their size and their unbroken connection with the central European Ashkenazi tradition, the Jews of Alsace and Lorraine maintained institutionally diversified communities. With its synagogue or place of prayer, its *mikveh*, school, cemetery, and court, the Jewish community provided fully for the religious needs of its members, saw to their education, assumed responsibility for the resident poor, and adjudicated civil cases between Jewish litigants. Since taxes were imposed upon corporate groups rather than individuals, the various Jewish communities were responsible for paying to the appropriate authorities the numerous charges to which the Jews were subjected. For the authorities, of course, this was the primary function of the Jewish communities, followed by maintaining order among the Jewish population. As late as 1769, for example, the Jewish community of Metz issued sumptuary legislation to limit public displays of luxury. Such edicts aimed to diminish the antisemitism that the demonstration of Jewish wealth might provoke by controlling the personal behavior of the community’s members.

Like other communities and corporate groups, the Jewish communities of the ancien régime were not democratic. Voting privileges depended upon gender, marital status, and wealth; in general, prosperous married men selected the communal leadership. The wealthiest laymen, an oli-

garchy of Jewish notables, led the community, serving as its syndics. Usually merchants, bankers, or industrialists on a grand scale, they exerted the most influence with both local and national authorities because of their contributions to the economy. They also bore the bulk of the communal tax burden. Sophisticated and somewhat acculturated, they often had international commercial contacts and access to French governmental representatives. Thus, at the end of the ancien régime a rich army purveyor and merchant named Cerf Berr led the Jews of Alsace; a banker and tobacco manufacturer from Nancy, Berr Isaac Berr, was among the most important leaders of the Jews of Lorraine. Although communal rabbis possessed the authority of Jewish tradition, they actually served at the will of the lay leaders.

Secular currents of the eighteenth century scarcely touched the Jewish communities of Alsace and Lorraine. From all accounts the practice of traditional Judaism was widespread among the Jewish leadership as well as the masses. Still, the Jews of northeastern France contributed little to elite Jewish culture. Few rabbis served the scattered communities, and many of them were recruited from centers of Ashkenazi scholarship in central Europe. There were several small yeshivas (academies of advanced study in rabbinics) in Alsace, but only the Jewish community of Metz could lay claim to being a regional center of Jewish culture. It was home to a widely respected yeshiva with a sizable student body drawn from the broad Ashkenazi orbit, its rabbinical office was of sufficient prestige to attract candidates of repute within the Jewish world, and in 1764 a Hebrew printing press was established there.²³

Fiscal constraints limited the cultural and institutional development of the Jewish communities of Alsace and Lorraine. Jewish rights of residence depended on the payment of duties that weighed increasingly heavily upon the communities during the eighteenth century. The Jews of Metz and the surrounding region, for example, owed a large sum of twenty thousand livres per year to the Duke of Brancas. To meet their annual payments, the Jewish communities, under the direction of their syndics, had to borrow funds; on the eve of the Revolution they were deeply in debt. Not surprisingly, the syndics of Metz restricted entry into the Jewish community to those who would be able to contribute to the tax burden and help defray the accumulated debt. Probably the straitened financial situation of the Jewish community hastened the decline of the city's Jewish population in the second half of the century. The tax burden also complicated the relationship between the growing number of Jews who lived in the surrounding region and Metz Jewish leaders.

Not only did the latter speak for the entire Jewish population of the province of Lorraine and the Trois-Évêchés vis-à-vis the authorities, they also allocated the sums that the outlying communities were expected to pay as their share of the interest on the accumulated debt and the current tax bill. As Jewish communities in the region grew in size, they increasingly resented this taxation without representation.

By the end of the ancien régime the authority of the traditional Jewish community had begun to erode, especially in the Ashkenazi settlements of the northeastern provinces, where it had reached its fullest expression. Disaffected communal members turned to non-Jewish courts and thus contributed to the loss of authority of the Jewish community. The status of the Jewish court of Metz, for example, became an issue in the struggle of the local *parlement* to assert its authority vis-à-vis the king, the traditional protector of the Jews. In 1743 the *parlement*, as a court of appeal, had demanded and received a French translation of the code of Jewish civil law, the Hoshen Mishpat, in order to be able to judge cases involving Jews that came to its attention.²⁴ Although the Jewish community in general had long proscribed bringing disputes among Jews into Gentile courts, in the eighteenth century a few Metz Jews, drawn from the affluent strata of the community, appealed to the Metz *parlement*. They challenged rabbinic jurisdiction over civil matters because they came away empty from the *bet din* (Jewish court) or were subject to such extreme sanctions as the *herem* (excommunication) to compel compliance with court decisions. As a result of one case, involving a widow whose husband had left her a greater part of his estate than she was entitled to under Jewish law, the *parlement* issued a decree in 1759 that banned the use of the *herem*. In response, paid agents of the community successfully lobbied the king. They argued for the indivisibility of religious and secular matters in Jewish law and pointed to the deleterious impact of the erosion of rabbinic authority on the ability of the communal leadership to maintain social order. In 1767 the king condemned the *parlement's* incursion upon royal authority, supporting the Jewish community's assertion of its traditional judicial prerogatives. In the last years of the ancien régime the *parlement* suspended its attacks upon the judicial privileges of the Jewish community. However, as a consequence of the struggle the community had conceded the right of its members to seek recourse in the *parlement* in serious cases or where judicial passions were enflamed. Furthermore, challenges to communal authority in Metz, while infrequent, did not cease.

Growing restriction of Jewish communal autonomy in eighteenth-century Metz confirmed the fragility of traditional patterns of Jewish self-governance in France at the end of the ancien régime. The Jews of Bordeaux and Bayonne had always taken their disputes to French courts. And the five to eight hundred Jews living in Paris on the eve of the French Revolution had no system of judicial autonomy, indeed no legal community whatsoever, because their presence in the capital had never been officially recognized. Their existence in a legal limbo offered a silent, and as yet unacknowledged, challenge to the communal autonomy of the rest of French Jewry.

Not only had weaknesses in the traditional structure of Jewish corporate autonomy developed, but among the more prosperous Ashkenazi and especially Sephardi Jews signs of new intellectual currents also appeared that would subvert the social and cultural hegemony of rabbinic tradition. While the Sephardi Jews of the southwest, because of their Marrano experience, had always been more acculturated than the Ashkenazi Jews of the northeastern provinces, in the last years of the ancien régime some observers noted a significant decline in religious observance in Bordeaux, particularly among the Sephardi elite. Rabbi Haim David Azulai, an emissary from the Jewish community of Palestine who periodically traversed Europe in search of contributions for the upkeep of the Jews of the Holy Land, remarked in his account of his 1777–1778 visit to Bordeaux that many of the leaders of the community held heretical ideas; some even ate forbidden foods in public and did not obey the laws of menstrual purity.²⁵ Such aspersions were not cast upon the Ashkenazi leadership, yet a stratum of that elite found attractive the doctrines of Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment) emanating from the cosmopolitan center of Berlin.²⁶

Knowledgeable in Hebrew, French, and German (as well as Yiddish), the wealthy Jewish merchants and bankers of the northeastern provinces, particularly those who resided in the urban communities of Lorraine, maintained contact with the new ideas emerging among the modern intellectuals of the Berlin Jewish bourgeoisie. Cerf Berr, the most important leader of Alsatian Jewry, and Berr Isaac Berr of Nancy, along with a dozen other Jews primarily of Metz and Nancy subscribed in the 1780s to the Hebrew Haskalah periodical *Hameassef*, published in Berlin. In 1782 Berr Isaac Berr had translated into French the Haskalah pamphlet *Divrei Shalom ve-Emet* (Words of Peace and Truth). The pamphlet promoted secular culture and urged Jewish schools to introduce secular

subjects into their curriculum. Characteristic of Haskalah writing, it called for a revolution in Jewish self-understanding and definition of culture: Jews were to privilege secular Western culture over traditional Jewish learning and were to seek social integration rather than separateness. Several years later Isaie Berr Bing of Metz published a Hebrew translation of one of the philosophical works of the outstanding figure of the Berlin Haskalah, Moses Mendelssohn.²⁷ Although the number of French *Maskilim* (followers of the Jewish enlightenment movement) was quite limited, their wealth and leadership position within the organized Jewish community allowed them to disseminate their ideas. Their openness to the doctrines of the German Haskalah suggests their desire for significant social and cultural change in their own communities and their recognition of the potential to succeed in their own time.

Alongside hints of social and ideological change within the Jewish communities of the northeastern provinces on the eve of the Revolution came potential changes in Jewish legal status. Although the developments affected only a few exceptional individuals, they breached the wall of manifold legal restrictions on Jews. They were the first crack in the system that had traditionally maintained Jews in a condition of subordination. Thus, for example, Cerf Berr successfully challenged the right of the city of Strasbourg to forbid the settlement of Jews within its jurisdiction. By securing a royal decree in support of his right to live in Strasbourg, he was able to move his large household, including his retainers, into the city.²⁸ Similarly, a few wealthy Jews in Lorraine secured letters patent enabling them to purchase property outside the Jewish quarter of their commune or to buy land in the countryside.²⁹ One Jewish banker and army purveyor who lived in Paris even acquired letters of naturalization from Louis XVI and bought the barony of Picquigny, with its accompanying feudal rights, including the right to appoint priests.³⁰ Although such instances of deviation from the normal status of Jews occasioned intense public debate and lawsuits, they brought attention to the anomalous situation of Jews in France, as long resident but foreign subjects of the king. The favors extended to prominent and economically valuable Jews potentially subverted the legal status of all Jews by invalidating the hegemony of existing legislation.

Despite challenges posed to the traditional status of the Jews in France—to their legal subordination and judicial autonomy—and to the persistence of traditional observance of Jewish law, Jews living in France on the eve of the French Revolution remained a distinct and largely unacculturated group. Partially segregated by law, by socioeconomic sta-

tus, and by choice, Jews lived on the margins of French society and culture. In agreement with those French who thought about Jews at all, they saw themselves as a separate group—Jews living under French rule but not French Jews. As yet there existed no social space for the construction of a French Jewish identity. Only a small sector of the Jews of France—many in the Sephardi population but only a handful of the elite in the Ashkenazi communities—knew enough French to read French literature or to converse with their French neighbors. By the end of the eighteenth century the first hesitant steps had been taken toward eroding the traditional status of the Jews in France, but it would take the force of revolution to transform their legal position and to create a French Jewish community whose members defined themselves in ways scarcely imaginable during the *ancien régime*.