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## A Bit of Clarity at the Outset

'The Jews don't eat pork.' 'The Jews are circumcised.' 'Jews are greedy.' 'Jews stick together.' 'The native land of the Jews is Israel.' 'All the Jews are now mobilized for Israel.' And so on. Claims about 'the Jews' abound. Some are laudatory, some defamatory, some even neutral. Some are radically false, but none is totally true. And for very good reason: the word 'Jews' is applied to very different collections of men and women. Even the classical distinction between those considered Jews by others and those who consider themselves Jews does not suffice to exhaust all the forms of diversity.

If we are to gain some understanding of the problems involving the Jews (in the various senses of the word), if we are to reason soundly, then we must constantly bear in mind that various sets of individuals are more or less commonly designated as Jews. One or another (and often two or three) of the following sets is usually meant.

1. The adherents of a well-defined religion, Judaism. Like any religion, it has its dogmas (the oneness of god, his selection of a chosen people, etc.), its sacred history (Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, the passage across the Red Sea, etc.), its multifarious and complex practices or rites (circumcision, sanctified holidays, dietary laws, etc.). As is the case with every religion nowadays, many adherents do not believe in this or that dogma, do not practice this or that rite, but nevertheless consider themselves among the faithful of the religion, part of a community historically formed on the basis of it, and not as part of any other. As in Christianity and other religions, many people practice only those 'rites of passage' which, they believe, are sufficient to establish their adherence: rites of birth,

marriage, and death, and often accession to adulthood as well.

2. Descendants of adherents of Judaism who no longer consider themselves faithful to the religion and who on the contrary subscribe in practice to simply deist or even atheist ideas, who sometimes have even converted to other religions, but who nevertheless desire to maintain some link with the adherents of religious Judaism and thus regard themselves as forming a sort of ethnic-national community along with them—a people, to use the most common term. It is especially easy for Jews to adopt this attitude, since unlike purely universalist religions like Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, Judaism, despite powerful universalist tendencies during certain periods, has also retained many traces of its origin as an ethnic religion specific to a particular people of the ancient Middle East: the people of Israel, also called the Hebrew people. The boundary is therefore evanescent between Jews in the religious sense, who are often not very religious but attribute an ethnic-national connotation to their adherence to the faith, and Jews who consider themselves members of a people to which religious Jews belong as well; in any case, the latter are often motivated, perhaps even in spite of their convictions, by a sentimentalism that ascribes an ethnic-national significance to Jewish rites, traditions, and even dogmas.

3. Other descendants of adherents of Judaism who have rejected any affiliation either to the religion or to a 'Jewish people' and who consider themselves atheists, deists, Christians, or whatever on the one hand, and French, Turkish, English, Arab, or whatever on the other. But despite this, since the memory of their descent from religious Jews has been preserved, others still consider them Jewish, at least on certain occasions and in certain contexts.

4. Yet other descendants of adherents of Judaism whose ancestry is unknown by others and often by themselves; they can only be called 'unknown Jews', as suggested by Roger Peyrefitte in a thick book whose only valid point was probably this designation and his insistence on the importance of the category, which is most often forgotten.

Transitions from one category to another are frequent. Sometimes they occur during the lifetime of a single individual; they occur quite often if we consider groups of lineages over time. In our epoch they are facilitated by the disappearance in a great part of the world of the

religious communities of times gone by. In the Muslim world, transitions are hampered by the fact that the Jews of the first three categories are institutionally considered members of a 'Jewish community' (also called 'Mosaic') unless they have formally converted to another religion. One belongs to this community by virtue of one's birth, and remains in it (barring conversion) until death, regardless of one's inner convictions, just as one is a member of a given nationality even if one lacks the slightest inkling of patriotism. Jews born in the Muslim world have internalized this conception quite profoundly, and have carried it with them in their migrations, like the North African Jews who have recently immigrated to France, where a wholly different conception has held sway since the revolution of 1789: a religion is only a religion, and if you no longer believe in its dogmas, no longer practise its rites, and no longer participate in its cultural organizations, then you are no longer a member of it, but are a French deist or atheist or whatever, regardless of your Catholic, Protestant or Jewish **ancestry**.

Between these two antipodal conceptions, of course, there are many mixed forms. The United States tends to approximate the Muslim model, though less rigorously, because of the multiplicity of groupings which reflects the formation of this nation of immigrants, the competition among them, and the attachment of most of them (after a period of attempted fusion in the great melting pot) to a cultural specificity of their own, in addition to their membership of the greater American nation.

In the Soviet Union and in some of the People's Democracies, the term 'Jew' defines membership of a 'nationality', like 'Uzbek', 'Ukrainian', or 'Russian'. In practice, this membership, which is recognized by law, amounts to approximately a religious community of the Muslim type. Except that the officially recognized criterion in the Soviet Union is not the Jewish religion (which the state combats along with all others), but the Yiddish language, which is considered a 'national language'. Nevertheless, this Germanic dialect, mingled with Slavic and Hebrew vocabulary, is spoken by only about one-fifth of the members of this Jewish 'nationality'. Most Jews in the USSR are well assimilated to Russian culture, even though they are descended from people whose religion was Judaism and whose language was Yiddish. But there are some who still practise this

religion but whose ancestors never spoke the language. The Jews of Georgia, Dagestan, and the Bukhara region—who speak Georgian or Turkish or Iranian dialects—have never known Yiddish.

In the rest of this book, I will try always to define the sense in which the term ‘Jews’ is being used, unless the meaning is clear from the context. Wherever this is not done, the set of people in question consists of the first three categories.