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Introduction

TO A GENERAL audience, the term "wandering Jew" seems innocuous enough. In modern-day America, one encounters it in a variety of mostly random places. The term refers to a popular houseplant, but also to a movie production company in California and a deserted silver mine in Arizona. It appears in self-descriptions on social media by Jews who happen to move to a new city or switch jobs, and in various musical compositions ranging from the Christian folk song "Three Wandering Jews" to the opening lines of one of Paul Simon's most beautiful songs.[1]

Before it was bulldozed by the enormous weight of American culture, the Wandering Jew had a more precise and much darker meaning. For centuries, it referred to a legendary Jewish figure who allegedly betrayed Jesus Christ on his way to the Crucifixion and was consequently cursed by him to wander the earth until the end of time. Today these details are for the most part known only in literary circles, but before World War II, the legend of the Wandering Jew was extremely popular across Europe, if known by different names. Some called this figure the Wandering Jew, while others invoked the Eternal Jew, and yet others referred to Ahasverus or Ahasver.

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The main source for the legend of the Wandering Jew is one of the most enigmatic pamphlets in European history. Published in German in 1602, the pamphlet is short and physically unremarkable. It nevertheless relates a most astonishing tale. According to the pamphlet, in the winter of 1542, a young German student by the name of Paul von Eitzen had traveled to visit his parents in the city of Hamburg. While in church the following Sunday, Eitzen saw an unusually tall man with long hair falling over his shoulders standing barefoot by the chancel and attentively listening to the sermon. Though it was winter, the stranger donned only "pants stretching to his feet, an outer garment reaching to his knees, and over that a coat down to his feet."[2] The calluses on his bare feet were so thick that "one could measure them with the thickness of two fingers across."[3] As he listened to the homily, the man didn't move, but when the priest mentioned the name of Jesus Christ, he "bowed, beat on his breast, and sighed deeply."[4] To Eitzen, the man seemed to be about fifty years old.

The 1602 pamphlet reports that in the days following Paul von Eitzen's encounter with this man, Eitzen approached him to inquire about his identity and asked him to clarify what business had brought him to Hamburg. The man replied in the Saxon dialect of the German language that his name was Ahasverus and that he had been born a Jew in Jerusalem in the time of Christ. He used to be a shoemaker and had a wife and child. Believing that Jesus was a heretic and a seducer of the Jews, Ahasverus joined the crowd at Pilate's palace and demanded that the murderer Barabbas be released and Jesus crucified. Afterward, he hurried back home and stood by his shop with his small child in his arms. When the procession to Calvary passed by Ahasverus's shop, Jesus stopped for a moment, and bearing the heavy cross on his back, leaned on a wall seeking respite.

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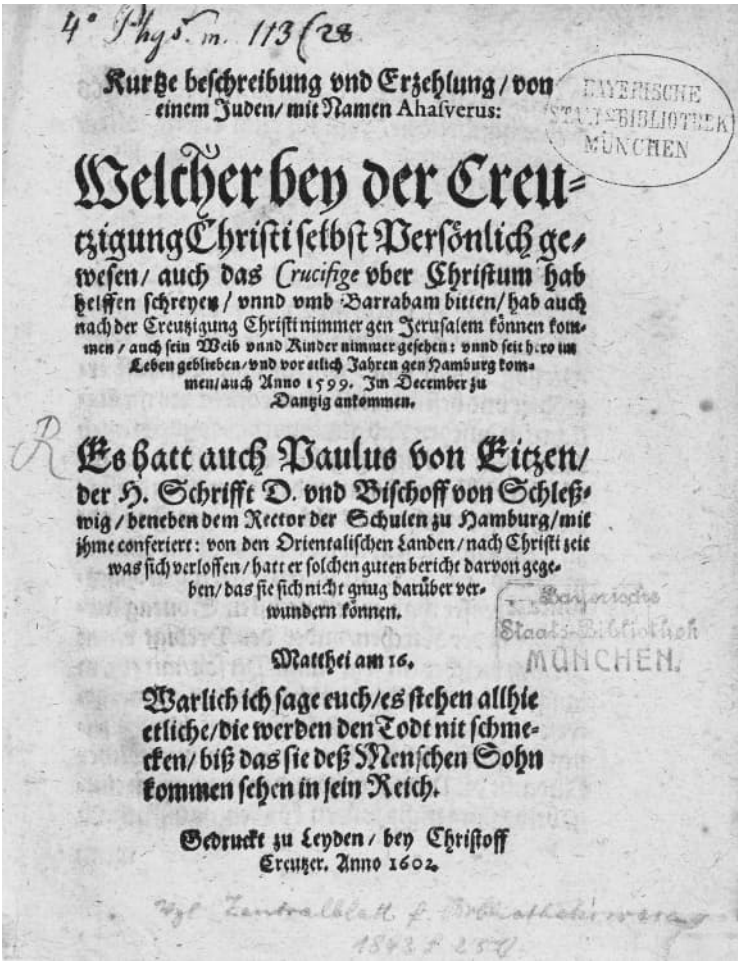
But Ahasverus cursed him and egged him on. Jesus then turned to Ahasverus, looked at him sternly, and spoke with passion: "I will stand here and rest, but you must go!"[5]

Ever since that day (so reads the pamphlet), Ahasverus had remained alive. He left his wife and child behind and, after witnessing the Crucifixion, wandered all over the world. When he revisited Jerusalem centuries later, the city stood desolate and his wife and child were long gone. He consequently continued his peregrinations in the Orient and elsewhere, a fact he allegedly proved to his interlocutor in Hamburg in 1542 by answering the latter's learned questions about circumstances concerning the Crucifixion, the history of the Orient, and the lives, sufferings, and deaths of the Apostles. During his stay in Hamburg, the stranger was never seen laughing, and when people offered him money, he immediately gave it over to the poor. His fate, he said, was to continue his wanderings until the Second Coming. The pamphlet also reports that Ahasverus speaks many languages other than German, and that whenever anyone takes the Lord's name in vain, he reproaches that person with great force.

As was common in Baroque Germany, the short pamphlet describing the figure that came to be known as the Wandering or Eternal Jew has a very long title. It begins with the words "A short description and tale of a Jew named Ahasverus, who was present in person at the Crucifixion of Christ . . . and a few years ago came to Hamburg."[6] For the sake of brevity, scholars usually refer to it as the "Short Description" or *Kurtze Beschreibung* in German (pronounced KOOR-tsay besh-RYE-boong), a practice we too shall adopt in this book. (See figure 1.)

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4° Phys. m. 113 (28
BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK MÜNCHEN

Kurtze beſchreibung vnd Erzehlung / von einem Juden / mit Namen Ahaſverus:

Welcher bey der Creu-
tzigung Chriſti ſelbſt Perſönlich ge-
weſen / auch das *Crucifige* vber Chriſtum hab
helffen ſchreyen / vnnd vmb Barrabam bitten / hab auch
nach der Creutzigung Chriſti nimmer gen Jeruſalem können kom-
men / auch ſein Weib vnnd Kinder nimmer geſehen: vnnd ſeit h. zo im
Leben geblieben / vnd vor etlich Jahren gen Hamburg kom-
men / auch Anno 1599. Im December zu
Dantzig ankommen.

Es hatt auch Paulus von Eitzen /
der H. Schrifft D. vnd Biſchoff von Schleß-
wig / beneben dem Rector der Schulen zu Hamburg / mit
jhme conferiert: von den Orientaliſchen Landen / nach Chriſti zeit
was ſich verloffen / hatt er ſolchen guten bericht darvon gege-
ben / das ſie ſich nicht gnug darüber ver-
wundern können.

Bayerische Staats-Bibliothek MÜNCHEN

Matthei am 16.

Warlich ich ſage euch / es ſtehen allhie
etliche / die werden den Todt nit ſchme-
cken / biß das ſie deß Menſchen Sohn
kommen ſehen in ſein Reich.

Gedruckt zu Leyden / bey Chriſtoff
Creutzer. Anno 1602.

Vgl. Zentralblatt f. Bibliothekswesen 1893 S. 254

FIGURE 1. Title page of the earliest known edition of the Kurtze Beschreibung as identified by Leonhard Neubaur (1893). Source: BSB, Rar. 825.

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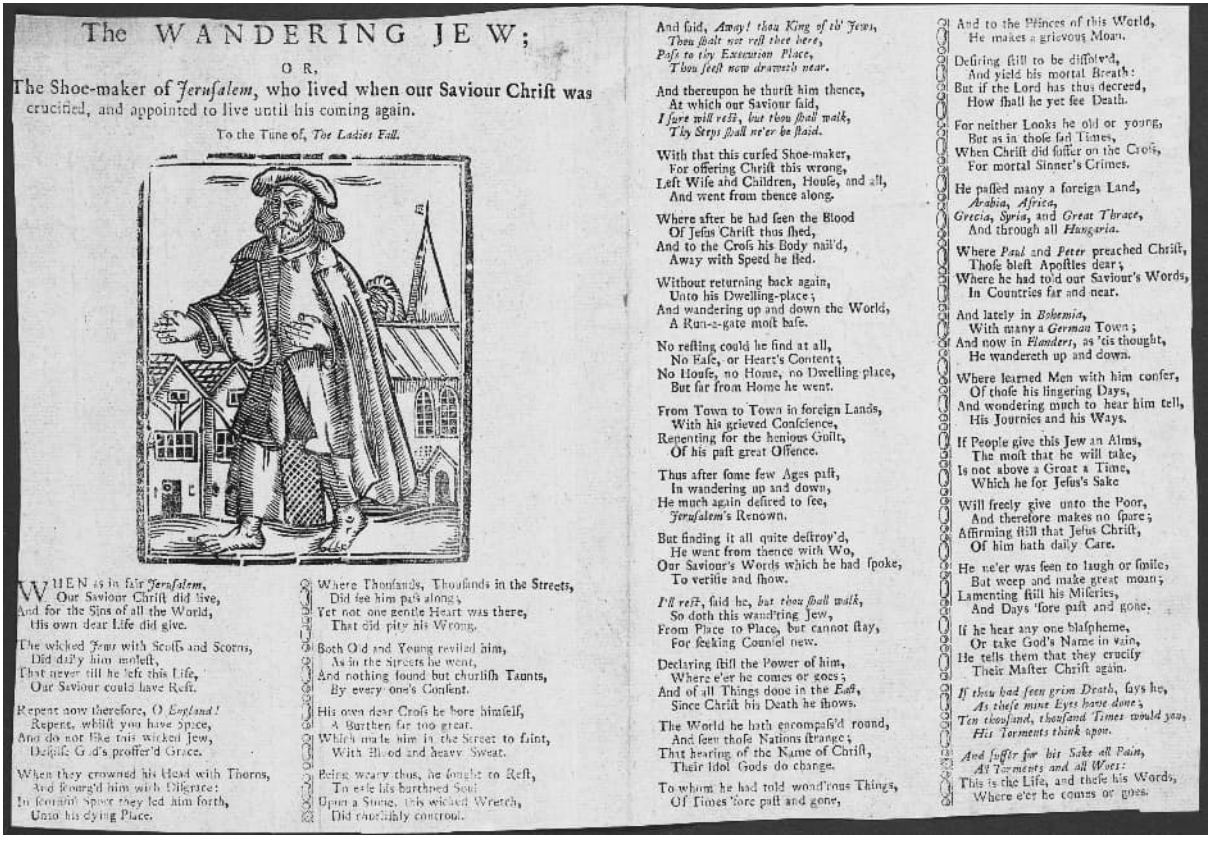
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More than four centuries after the publication of the Kurtze Beschreibung, scholars still don't know much about it. Despite a great deal of speculation, the pamphlet's author, publisher, and place of publication remain unknown, and the significance of certain details in the story, including the setting in 1542 Hamburg, or the decision to call the man "Ahasverus" (the name of the Persian king in the Book of Esther), have never been clarified.[7] What is unquestionably clear, however, is that almost as soon as the pamphlet was published, the story about the wandering Ahasverus spread like wildfire across Northern Europe. The pamphlet came out in at least eleven more German editions by the end of 1602, and more than thirty additional ones by the end of the century. Translations into other languages, including French, Dutch, English, Polish, Swedish, and even Icelandic, also ensued.[8]

But there is more. Already in the seventeenth century, Ahasverus began to feature in proverbs and folk art, and from there, this figure wandered into ballads, poems, novellas, and novels, including by such luminaries as Alexandre Dumas, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Pushkin, Byron, Shelley, Dickens, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name but a few. (See figure 2.)

Moreover, reports of purported sightings of Ahasverus proliferated after 1602. (See figure 3.) Presumptive eyewitnesses placed him in dozens of cities across Europe and beyond, including Danzig, Madrid, Brussels, London, Paris, and even upstate New York.[9] By the late nineteenth century, Ahasverus was such a popular figure in some contexts that one could find him mentioned in political essays, parliamentary speeches, and antisemitic newspapers, but also in descriptions of ordinary people's dreams and in medical reports about very real wanderers who seemed to have lost both their way and their mind.[10] The following description came from the great

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The WANDERING JEW;

OR,

The Shoe-maker of *Jerusalem*, who lived when our Saviour Christ was crucified, and appointed to live until his coming again.

To the Tune of, *The Ladies Fall.*

WHEN as in fair *Jerusalem*,
Our Saviour Christ did live,
And for the Sins of all the World,
His own dear Life did give.

The wicked Jews with Scoffs and Scorns,
Did daily him molest,
That never till he left this Life,
Our Saviour could have Rest.

Repent now therefore, O *England!*
Repent, whilst you have Space,
And do not like this wicked Jew,
Despise God's proffer'd Grace.

When they crowned his Head with Thorns,
And fourg'd him with Disgrace:
In fowlest Spite they led him forth,
Unto his dying Place.

Where Thousands, Thousands in the Streets,
Did see him pass along;
Yet not one gentle Heart was there,
That did pity his Wrong.

Both Old and Young reviled him,
As in the Streets he went,
And nothing found but churlish Taunts,
By every one's Consent.

His own dear Cross he bore himself,
A Burthen far too great.
Which made him in the Street to faint,
With Blood and heavy Sweat.

Being weary thus, he sought to Rest,
To ease his burthned Soul
Upon a Stone, this wicked Wretch,
Did cruelishly controul.

And said, *Away! thou King of th' Jews,*
Thou shalt not rest thee here,
Pass to thy Execution Place,
Thou seest now draweth near.

And thereupon he thrust him thence,
At which our Saviour said,
I sure will rest, but thou shalt walk,
Thy Steps shall ne'er be staid.

With that this cursed Shoe-maker,
For offering Christ this wrong,
Left Wife and Children, House, and all,
And went from thence along.

Where after he had seen the Blood
Of Jesus Christ thus shed,
And to the Cross his Body nail'd,
Away with Speed he fled.

Without returning back again,
Unto his Dwelling-place;
And wandering up and down the World,
A Run-a-gate most base.

No resting could he find at all,
No Ease, or Heart's Content;
No House, no Home, no Dwelling-place,
But far from Home he went.

From Town to Town in foreign Lands,
With his grieved Conscience,
Repenting for the heinous Guilt,
Of his past great Offence.

Thus after some few Ages past,
In wandering up and down,
He much again desired to see,
Jerusalem's Renown.

But finding it all quite destroy'd,
He went from thence with Wo,
Our Saviour's Words which he had spoke,
To verifie and show.

I'll rest, said he, *but thou shalt walk*,
So doth this wand'ring Jew,
From Place to Place, but cannot stay,
For seeking Counsel new.

Declaring still the Power of him,
Where e'er he comes or goes;
And of all Things done in the *East*,
Since Christ his Death he shows.

The World he hath encompass'd round,
And seen those Nations strange;
That hearing of the Name of Christ,
Their Idol Gods do change.

To whom he had told wond'rous Things,
Of Times 'fore past and gone,

And to the Princes of this World,
He makes a grievous Moan.

Desiring still to be dissolv'd,
And yield his mortal Breath:
But if the Lord has thus decreed,
How shall he yet see Death.

For neither Looks he old or young,
But as in those sad Times,
When Christ did suffer on the Cross,
For mortal Sinner's Crimes.

He passed many a foreign Land,
Arabia, Africa,
Grecia, Syria, and *Great Thrace,*
And through all *Hungaria.*

Where *Paul* and *Peter* preached Christ,
Those blest Apostles dear;
Where he had told our Saviour's Words,
In Countries far and near.

And lately in *Bohemia,*
With many a *German* Town;
And now in *Flanders,* as 'tis thought,
He wandereth up and down.

Where learned Men with him confer,
Of those his lingering Days,
And wondering much to hear him tell,
His Journies and his Ways.

If People give this Jew an Alms,
The most that he will take,
Is not above a Groat a Time,
Which he for Jesus's Sake

Will freely give unto the Poor,
And therefore makes no spare;
Affirming still that Jesus Christ,
Of him hath daily Care.

He ne'er was seen to laugh or smile,
But weep and make great moan;
Lamenting still his Miseries,
And Days 'fore past and gone.

If he hear any one blaspheme,
Or take God's Name in vain,
He tells them that they crucify
Their Master Christ again.

If thou had seen grim Death, says he,
As those mine Eyes have done;
Ten thousand, thousand Times would you,
His Torments think upon.

And suffer for his Sake all Pain,
All Torments and all Woes:
This is the Life, and these his Words,
Where e'er he comes or goes.

FIGURE 2. The Wandering Jew; / Or, / The Shoe-maker of Jerusalem, who lived when our Saviour Christ was / crucified, and appointed to live until his coming again. 1750, HEH 289746. Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

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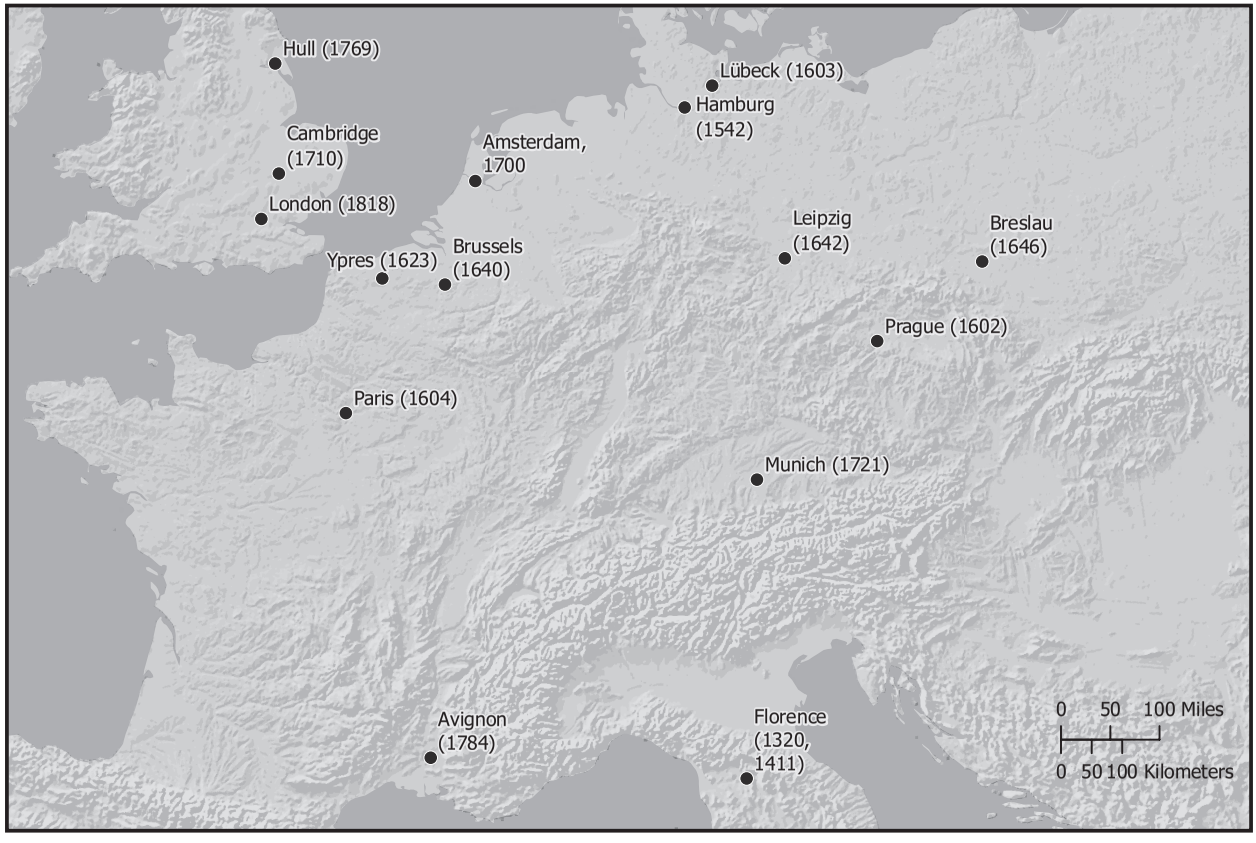


FIGURE 3. Spotting the Wandering Jew in early modern Europe. Source: Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 65.

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nineteenth-century Hungarian statesman and writer Jozsef Eotvos:

> Who doesn't know the mythical Ahasverus, the Eternal Jew, who by turning away from Our Savior as He was carrying the Cross and by refusing to give Him a glass of water, was condemned to walk the earth among men, cursed and unable to die, alone, like the dry leaves of a by-gone spring, carried away by the currents of the times without a place on which to lay his tired head. Everybody knows the legend; one would be hard pressed to find a place, especially among the north European peoples, where it hasn't played an important role in local folklore. I know no sadder story, nothing that touches my soul more deeply, because this legend is the truth!
>
> The Wandering Jew is not a figment of our imagination. He lives and suffers among us. Go to the market place and there you shall find him, standing among the multitude in the midst of the hustle and bustle, spreading his wretched wares on a table or on the ground, offering to sell them with his shouts, almost begging; go to the great plateau, and you shall find him there, too, treading through the sand with a heavy load on his back, accompanied by the distant voices of a boisterous inn. Go anywhere, from one end of the homeland to the other, and you shall find him.[11]

As this description makes clear, the legend of Ahasverus presents a remarkable mixture of history and myth, truth and fantasy.

Eotvos's description of Ahasverus is not particularly antisemitic, and the same is true of common contemporary uses of the expression "wandering Jew." But ever since the publication

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of the Kurtze Beschreibung in 1602, the figure of the wandering Ahasverus has also played a prominent role in the history of antisemitism. In the original 1602 pamphlet, the description of the Christ-denying Jewish cobbler contained anti-Jewish stereotypes that persisted for centuries, reaching a climax in an infamous Nazi propaganda exhibition titled *The Eternal Jew* and the eponymous and extremely vile film, directed by Fritz Hippler, in 1940.[12]

Opened in Munich's Deutsches Museum on November 8, 1937, the exhibition *The Eternal Jew* (Gr. *Der ewige Jude*) was named for one of Ahasverus's common appellations in German, and indeed it contained many implicit references to his legend, even without mentioning Ahasverus by name. (See figures 4 and 5.) The exhibition consisted of a series of rooms with displays of the alleged "curse" of Jewish existence in Europe, with one room featuring grotesque "Jewish" body parts (nose, lips, mouth), another showing photographs of famous Jews in politics and the arts, and a third displaying out-of-context excerpts from Jewish sources, allegedly demonstrating that Jews do not consider non-Jews to be fellow humans. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, also featured prominently in the exhibition in the form of some of his most disgusting anti-Jewish quotes. Behind the exhibition's inflammatory rhetoric stood the claim that coexistence between so called "Aryans" and Jews was impossible. According to Nazi ideology, the Jewish race had always been a foreign element in European society. This is why the Jews were universally hated and doomed to repeated expulsions.

The exhibition *The Eternal Jew* and the movie it inspired had of course little to do with historical reality. Jews are no less European than Christians, and Nazi racial theory had no basis in scientific fact. But in another sense, the exhibition and the movie rang true. In the 1930s, Nazi authorities forced Jews to

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FIGURE 4. Postmarked postcard of the exhibition *The Eternal Jew* (Munich, 1937). Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of the Katz Family, Accession Number: 2016.184.272.

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FIGURE 5. A case featuring "typical Jewish external features" at the exhibition *The Eternal Jew*, Munich, Germany, November 1937. © SZ Photo / Bridgeman Images.

emigrate from Germany, and when the Wehrmacht invaded Poland in September 1939, it dispossessed Jews, driving them into ghettos (or worse). Thus, though the exhibition and film *The Eternal Jew* weren't true originally, they served as a kind of transcript for a future reality: they *became* reality when millions of homeless, desperate Jews turned into wandering Jews. This is a fundamental point that will inform this book at every turn. We often think of history as preceding fictional accounts, providing writers such as Homer, Shakespeare, or Tolstoy with material to shape into literary (fictional) accounts. But sometimes causation points in the opposite direction: literary descriptions often shape (rather than merely represent) reality. Some such depictions provide positive life models, as when Alexander the Great fashioned his own biography after the legendary hero Achilles or when Napoleon Bonaparte thought of his entire life as a kind of novel. ("Quel roman pourtant que ma vie!" he exclaimed to an interlocutor toward the end of his life.[13]) In other cases, fabrications affect people negatively: many an early modern woman lost her life because of fanciful fabrications about witches, and the prevarications contained in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion had disastrous effects on Jewish life in the twentieth century. The reader should expect

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to see the figure of the Wandering Jew serving in these two functions repeatedly in the pages of this book.

Because of its importance to European culture, Ahasverus's immense popularity after 1602 has led scholars to spill much ink trying to document and explain it.[14] Most have relied on one or two methods, often in combination. The first was to highlight the universal aspect of his tale. The legend of the Wandering Jew, we are told, is but a local example of a universal trope: human beings commit acts of injustice against one another or the gods, often wandering from place to place as a consequence.[15] True enough: folk narratives where the gods punish individual sinners by obligating them to long wanderings are indeed common. They exist in Greek mythology (Odysseus), in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an (Adam, Cain), in Nordic and Germanic mythologies (the Wild Hunter), and even in modern folktales (the Flying Dutchman, the Ancient Mariner). Clearly, Ahasverus isn't as unique as one might think at first. His figure seems to be a particular iteration of a general literary motif or anthropological archetype of a divinely punished exile. Alexandre Dumas captured this sentiment when he noted in his book on the Wandering Jew that "[i]t is not the history of a single person which we are telling, but the history of humanity."[16]

There is much to be said in favor of this understanding of Ahasverus's story. It explains, at least in part, why writers with no knowledge of early modern Germany or Jewish history have been attracted to the figure of the Wandering Jew: they saw in Ahasverus also a reflection of themselves and their particular life circumstances. But this approach also comes at a price.[17]

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Consider, for example, the Kurtze Beschreibung and its enigmatic historical context. The original Ahasverus might have been a local example of a larger, even universal, trope. But why was the pamphlet about him published in 1602 and not earlier or later? Who wrote and published it, where, for what particular purpose, and with what specific audience in mind? The main drawback of treating stories like that of Ahasverus as an expression of a universal symbolic grammar is that it deprives them of their historical specificity. If we are to better understand Ahasverus's gravitational pull in the modern world, we must supplant the anthropological mode of analysis with at least a modicum of history.

A second way of coming to terms with Ahasverus's story is by analyzing artistic representations. Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, important works of scholarship have enumerated and examined such representations in European literature, music, and the visual arts.[18] The results of these investigations have often been illuminating, as the case of the Kurtze Beschreibung once again convincingly shows. As several scholars have demonstrated, wandering figures associated with Christ's Passion appeared centuries before the 1602 pamphlet, notably in thirteenth-century chronicles such as the work of the English monk Matthew Paris. Like the description in the later Kurtze Beschreibung, these early accounts relate how Jesus, on the eve of his Crucifixion, cursed a person before telling him, "I go now, but you will await me till I come back."[19] Across sources, the names vary. Some call this figure Cartaphilus, other sources mention Butadeus, and a third group invokes the Apostle John, about whom Jesus reportedly said, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" (John 21:22–23). No matter: the similarities between these stories and the 1602 pamphlet are so striking that they cannot possibly be coincidental.

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The author of the Kurtze Beschreibung most certainly did not cut the figure of Ahasverus out of whole cloth.

What is true for the 1602 pamphlet applies just as well to other representations of the Wandering Jew in history. Literary scholars, folklorists, and art historians have contributed immensely to our understanding of the legend of the Wandering Jew by shedding light on what artists and writers borrowed from one another in describing him and how they added new details to his tale. This is often wonderfully well done, and the following pages draw extensively on this scholarship. But just as with the anthropological approach to the story of the Wandering Jew, a heavy focus on artistic representations of Ahasverus tends to concentrate on the general and philosophical, rather than the particular, as no lesser authority than Aristotle once pointed out.[20] Consider again the example of the 1602 pamphlet. The existence of earlier accounts of a wandering figure cursed by Jesus is enlightening, but it still doesn't explain who resurrected the story in 1602, where this happened, or why. Moreover, the story the Kurtze Beschreibung told is full of historical allusions. According to the 1602 pamphlet, in 1542 Ahasverus appeared in Hamburg—a real city in northern Germany—where he met Paul von Eitzen and introduced himself as the Jew Ahasverus. Why this specificity of description? Why the meeting with Paul von Eitzen of all people, why in 1542, why in Hamburg, and why the name "Ahasverus" and not Cartaphilus, Butadeus, or John? We have already noted this same mixture of fiction and history in the exhibition *The Eternal Jew* in Nazi Germany and in Eotvos's writings. My point is that, while the legend of Ahasverus has important anthropological and artistic dimensions, the story cannot be reduced to them and them alone. Ahasverus also has a history, and historical work begins not where the text is most general, but on the

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contrary, where it is so specific that at first "it makes no sense" (Robert Darnton).[21]

The following pages discuss several crucial incidents in Ahasverus's historical–fictional life. They consist of five chapters that proceed, for reasons that will become clear later, in reverse chronological order, starting in the twentieth century, and then moving deeper into the past. One can read them as stand-alone pieces, each describing an isolated moment when Ahasverus's anthropological and literary aspects intermingled with very real historical circumstances. Taken together, however, the chapters also constitute a whole that is greater than the individual parts. As such, it constitutes a general, if also necessarily fragmentary, biography of the ghostly figure of the Wandering Jew.

The book's first chapter, "The Apparition (1952)," tells the story of a recent sighting of Ahasverus. It takes place in the early 1950s in the young State of Israel, where dozens of reliable eyewitnesses over the course of some three years came across a man who fit the description of the Kurtze Beschreibung to a T. Because the historical moment this chapter describes is still recent, the events it discusses illumine what a serious historical approach to Ahasverus's legend can help us see. Reports of sightings of Ahasverus should not be dismissed out of hand. However strange it sounds, they can represent an important aspect of historical reality.

Chapter 2, "When Ahasverus Turned Jewish (1873)," travels further back in time to the Russian empire of the late nineteenth century. The folklore specialist Galit Hasan-Rokem has already suggested that Jews might have helped in shaping the legend of the Wandering Jew over the centuries.[22] Under what

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exact historical circumstances, however, could a tale based on anti-Jewish stereotypes be accepted, and eventually even celebrated, by Jews? What psychological and cultural mechanisms could possibly bring about such a transformation? The chapter sheds light on these important historical questions by reconstructing the life story of the man who tried to come to terms with this phenomenon for the first time.

Chapter 3, "A True Story That Never Happened (1711)," descends deeper into the well of the past. Its topic is the great fire that devastated the Jewish ghetto in Frankfurt am Main in 1711 and the image of Ahasverus that emerged from its ashes. Already in the early modern period, some scholars noted the strange mixture of history and fabrication in the story of the Wandering Jew. In the wake of the Frankfurt fire, one local scholar sat down to explain it. The result was the most influential historical–theological explanation for how Ahasverus's story could be simultaneously false and real.

The book's fourth chapter, "The Case of Ahasverus in Hamburg (1602)," reaches the origin point of Ahasverus's modern story—the enigmatic circumstances surrounding the creation of the Kurtze Beschreibung. Although the pamphlet lacks the name of an author, publisher, or place of publication, a detective-like investigation of its shape and content tells us a great deal about the intention behind it, and whether it was based, however loosely, on a historical encounter between a German student and a mysterious Jew. Insights from the previous three chapters combine here to conjure a powerful picture of the original "Ahasverus moment." From its inception, there were universal and literary but also historical dimensions to the story of Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew.

Having completed a journey that spans some three continents and more than 400 years, the book's fifth and final

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chapter, "I, Ahasverus (2025)," asks what is true and fictional about Ahasverus's story today. Do people still intimately identify with Ahasverus and perhaps even spot him in real life? If so, who are they, where do they live, and what exactly do they see in Ahasverus? What seemed all along like a dispassionate historical account of a premodern legendary figure assumes a very personal turn here. Imagine, once again, this book's opening scene: a middle-aged scholar sets up a new computer in his Princeton study. Suddenly, a ghost from his past appears on the screen.

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